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## **Maritime Labour, Circulations of Struggle and Constructions of Transnational Subaltern Agency: the Spatial Politics of the 1939 Indian Seafarers' Strikes**

### **Introduction**

In early September, 1939, following the outbreak of the Second World War, Indian merchant seafarers struck across the British Empire. The strikes affected vessels in ports as far apart as Australia, Britain, Burma, India and South Africa causing serious difficulties to colonial shipping networks at a strategically pivotal time (Kirkby and Monk, 2016: 212). The minutes of a Directors' Meeting of the Clan Line held in late November of that year give a sense of some of the dynamics of the strike from the perspective of ship-owners. Referring to the case of the "*Clan MacDougall*", a Clan Line steamer, the Managers' report records that 'when the vessel first arrived in Australia the men agreed to carry on with a 50% increase in wages, later they absolutely refused to proceed.' The minutes note that 'We accordingly arranged for a short crew, consisting of those willing to continue, to bring the vessel to Colombo, to which port a fresh crew will be sent to meet her. Those Natives who refused duty were prosecuted and sentenced to four weeks hard labour it is understood that these men are being repatriated by signing on the "*City of Canberra*"' (Clan Line, 1939: 322).

This account of the *Clan MacDougall* draws attention to some of the key aspects of the 1939 strikes. It emphasises the impact of the Indian seafarers 'refusal to proceed' from the port of Sydney which effectively blockaded the ship in the port. The broader context of the disputes is betrayed by the racialized and colonial terminology used in the Clan Line's account, such as the reference to the Indian seafarers crewing the vessel as 'Natives'. A key grievance of the strikers was not only that they were significantly less well paid than white seafarers and were allocated considerably less space aboard ship, but that their lives were explicitly valued less through lower war bonuses and war risk payments (Sherwood, 2003). The risks associated with the war were compounded by the way that India had been involved in the conflict without any democratic consultation after the 'unilateral declaration of war on Nazi Germany' which led the Congress Party to resign from involvement in the Government of India (Raza, 2020: 216, Lane, 1990).

In 1939 Indian seafarers constituted a sizeable proportion of the British merchant marine with the High Commissioner of India noting that there were 'over 30,000 Indian lascars employed in the ships registered in the UK and they form about one-fifth of the total number of seamen

employed in those ships' (High Commissioner, 1939). This paper uses a detailed engagement with the disputes to engage with the core themes of this special issue. By exploring the relations between trajectories of resistance, circulation and solidarity it assesses some of the different spatialities through which subaltern agency was constituted through the strikes. Central here was the ways in which seafarers were able to effectively blockade their ships in port and to prevent them from sailing. Though doing so I discuss how aspects of the unequal racialized forms of maritime labour that underpinned the 'imperial cartography' of logistics spaces were contested at this particularly strategic and pivotal moment (Cowen, 2014: 5). Such discussion has strong resonances with work which seeks to be 'attentive to moments of struggle within logistical networks' (Chua et al, 2015: 626).

***The paper is informed by an engagement with*** what Gopal Balachandran (2012: 34) has termed 'networked forms of subaltern agency' and is animated by a commitment to challenge pervasive tendencies to whiten histories of class, including on the left (Valluvan, 2019). **I intervene in the relations between labour and coloniality from my location as a scholar who has been racialised as white and has access to the funding and visa privileges that enable transnational research. It is shaped, however, by a direct contestation of dominant articulations of whiteness and labour, and by a concern that the stories of organising discussed here can usefully disrupt the terms on which narratives of race, class, gender and sexuality are articulated in the contemporary political moment.**

The paper first situates the strikes in relation to recent work on the dynamics of logistics space and on the intersections between maritime labour and anti-colonial politics. I then engage with three aspects of the dynamics of the strike which reflect different elements of its spatial politics. The second section situates the strikes in relation to longer histories of organising of Indian seafarers and the third section engages with the dynamics of circulation shaped through the strike. The final section considers the ways in which the circulation of strikes/ resistances was facilitated by solidarities which were shaped by different place-based political cultures in Glasgow and London.

### **Maritime Labour, Seafarers' Struggles and Global Circulations**

In an insightful essay on the relation between seafarers and global narratives Ravi Ahuja critiques accounts which 'abstract the experiences of (individual or collective) historical actors from larger, very concrete, but [...], often opaque historical processes' (Ahuja, 2012: 83). He challenges what he sees as an inverted version of apologetic globalisation narratives

in subaltern histories which abstract seafarers' agency and experience from 'relations of domination in general and to capital in particular' (Ahuja, 2012: 81). He contends that through avoiding a direct engagement with the dynamic practices of domination and conflict reduces the contexts of maritime worlds to an 'external, essentially unchangeable "second nature"' (Ahuja, 2012: 81). By contrast Ahuja positions the 'spatial and social confinement' of steamship crews as 'a persistently embattled field, an increasingly important trait of a quickly transforming seafaring life and a key element of a ship's rigid social hierarchy' (Ahuja, 2012: 82).

Ahuja's account raises key questions about the terms on which the agency of maritime workers might be recovered and asserted. His account, however, is rather reticent about the terms on which collective forms of subaltern agency might be engaged with. Here I argue that scrutinising the relations between seafarers and forms of circulation offers important ways of thinking about the formation of collective agency 'from below'. I suggest that this can be done through directly engaging with the spatially stretched unequal relations of power that Ahuja contends are often treated as a fixed backdrop to work on subaltern maritime politics. In this respect maritime workers have long constructed political agency and solidarity through intervening in the spatial relations and connections which their labour produces (Cole, 2018, Kosmatopoulos, 2019). Laleh Khalili has demonstrated how strikes by seafarers and dockers on the Arabian Peninsula shaped significant connections between labour struggles and articulations of anti-colonialism. Khalili also signals the racialised, colonial imaginaries through which such events were narrated, noting how '[c]olonial racial hierarchies pulsate' through official accounts labour unrest (Khalili, 2020: 185).

In similar vein the circulation of unrest among seafarers' during the 1939 strikes was narrated by colonial officials through metaphors of 'fever' and 'contagion', classic tropes of what Ranajit Guha has termed 'the prose of counter-insurgency'. Guha's work drew attention to the spatial metaphors used by colonial officials to describe the circulation of revolt which made the idea that insurgency is 'a motivated and conscious undertaking' unrepresentable (Guha, 2009: 195-196). This poses the challenge of how the politics of circulation integral to these strikes might be narrated through spatial imaginaries which are both attentive to forms of subaltern agency and avoid presenting circulation of both capital and labour as a mere backdrop to the strikes. To do so necessitates considering the spatialities and dynamics through which circulations and blockades become constructed and articulated.

In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Ranajit Guha declares, citing Gramsci, that 'There is no room for pure spontaneity in history' (Guha, 1983: 5). Spontaneity, as Guha

argues, has often been used to dispossess subaltern politics of their histories and geographies. Asserting the trajectories of subaltern politics and organising that shaped the 1939 strikes opens up different ways of thinking about the relations that shape blockades and their impacts on the dynamics of circulation. As Sasha Davis argues, in this special issue, ‘examining activity blockades through the lens of what produces them, and what they produce, can demonstrate the sites of apparent blockage against particular circulations of commodities, state power and capital are also sites of political action that seek to nurture alternative social, economic, and political action’ (Davis, 2021: 2, see also Chester, this issue). Here I contribute to such an approach by highlighting the relations between trajectories of resistance, circulation and solidarity and how they intersected with and challenged imperial connections and processes. Examining the overlapping relations between seafarers, their unions and anti-colonial figures that coalesced in the strikes can be used to trace different forms of agency. Such agency and the contested terms it was generated emerges through considering the negotiation of the differing and contested locations of actors in relation to the circulation of both labour and capital. Thus while Indian seafaring unions were involved in the strikes, particularly in the agreement that partially brought them to an end, they were far from a straightforward outcome of union organising. They reflect Raj Chandavarkar’s characterisation of the inter-war Indian labour movement, in that trade unions ‘existed often as a loose superstructure constructed over an active undergrowth of informal organization and seemingly spontaneous industrial action’ (Chandavarkar, 1998: 74, see also Ray, 2020). Such a situation was exacerbated in maritime contexts, given the significant spatial and temporal distance between union organisers and seafarers.

Further, anti-colonial organising often displayed a strong ambivalence towards labour struggles

as indicated by accounts of militants such as **Kali Ghosh. From Khulna in East Bengal, Ghosh was involved in various anti-colonial movements in the 1920s and 30s and argued that ‘Congress showed no sympathy’ for the Bombay mill strikes in the late 1920s or ‘for labour problems in general’** (Ghosh, 2013: 116). Rehana Ahmed has stressed the ‘impossibility of reducing’ the ‘diversity and multiplicity’ of Indian workers’ experience in inter-war Britain to a ‘universal narrative of anti-colonial resistance’ (Ahmed, 2012: 79). Engaging with the contrasting relations of different actors to processes of circulation, particularly at different junctures of the strikes help assert such ‘diversity and multiplicity’ and the contested ways they impacted on the conduct of the strikes. This was particularly important given the brokering roles of figures like Surat Ali who were involved in both

organising seafarers and in enforcing the deal that brought the strike to an end (Balachandran, 2012: 195). Ahmed's insistence on unpacking universal narratives of anti-colonial resistance is important here, as maritime workers such as seafarers were often positioned in subordinate ways to dominant modes of anti-colonial politics, particularly in terms of the fraught politics around caste and religion.

Abdul Qureshi, a seafarer from Sylhet who was a seafarer in the 1930s and 1940s noted that 'if you were a candidate to be in the sea service it was best to be a Muslim' and indicates that this aligned awkwardly with the politics of the Indian National Congress (Qureshi, 1987: 157-158). The main Indian seafaring unions at this juncture, however, represented, as Heather Goodhall has argued, 'Christian, Sikh, Hindu and Islamic seafarers' (Goodhall, 2008: 46). The recruitment of seafarers intersected with the uneven regional politics of India and Indian nationalism, with seafarers often came from relatively marginal regions such as Jammu and Kashmir. There was a particular association, as in Qureshi's case, with Sylhet which was then part of East Bengal and is now in current day Bangladesh (G. Arunima, 2016, Hossain, 2013, Adams, 1987). Seafarers' conduct did not always align neatly with leftist political projects (Hyslop, 2009a, Ghosh, 2013: 153-154), or with the predominantly upper-caste figures who had leadership positions in anti-colonial movements (Amrith, 2014).

By the mid-1930s, however, organisations had emerged in Britain such as the Colonial Seamen's Association (CSA) which combined a broad anti-colonial perspective with struggles over the labour conditions of seafarers from racialized minorities (Featherstone, 2019, Høgsbjerg, 2011, Tabili, 1994). Organizations such as the CSA were part of the contested relations between anti-colonial movements, the left and labour politics which shaped the response to the onset of the Second World War. The Government of India's decision to involve India in the war without consultation and the associated repression of nationalists and Communists led to significant dissent. Writing to Sir Walter Citrine, the General Secretary of the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) in September 1940, NM Joshi, of the Indian National Trade Union Federation, argued that while 'The leaders of some of the Trade Unions are agreeable to support the war without considering the political freedom of India. I am afraid this view is not shared by the majority.' He continued that 'Moreover, the Government of India, under the Defence of India Act have clapped in Jail almost the whole of the communist element in the Trade Union Movement and also some of the non-communist element' (Joshi, 1940).

Joshi's correspondence with Citrine signals the contested dynamics around internationalism in relation to the war and how these articulated awkwardly with colonial labour geographies

(see Abraham, 2015, Silverman, 2000). The dramatic realignments on the left, particularly through the tortuous shifts of the international Communist movement, meant that organisations such as the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) moved from supporting the war in early September, 1939, to viewing it as an imperialist war by late September, 1939 to viewing it as a ‘people’s war against fascism’ after the Soviet Union entered the conflict in June, 1941 (Morgan, 1989, Raza, 2020). If British Communists’ engagements with ideas of an ‘imperialist war’ were largely fleeting, Joshi’s remarks indicate the extent to which for Indian leftists and trade-unionists the conflict was articulated primarily in relation to anti-colonial logics and concerns (Datta Gupta, 2011: 125).

The relations between Indian anti-colonial politics and maritime spaces, as Andrew Davies’s work on the Royal Indian Naval Mutiny of 1946 demonstrates, could be articulated in generative terms (Davies, 2019). Davies uses the trial records of the mutineers to follow how the mutineers’ grievances and actions travelled and were articulated between different sites and vessels (Davies, 2019). In similar fashion this paper uses various archival materials as a lens through which to understand and reconstruct the geographies of circulation which were integral to the strikes. I draw on the extensive materials on the strikes in the Board of Trade and India Office records and supplements these sources with the papers of shipping organisations such as the Clan Line and the Shipping Federation. These accounts primarily shed light on aspects of the official response to the strikes, though they contain very useful reports on individual ships and include detailed accounts of grievances. These sources are used to detail the ways the strikes affected twelve ships, but this is far from exhaustive and the strikes affected many more vessels.

In line with a commitment to foreground aspects of subaltern agency in relation to the forms of circulation in the strikes I draw on various sources relating directly to labour and anti-colonial organising. The papers of the All-India Trade Union Congress and of V.K. Krishna Menon are used to position the strikes in relation to broader dynamics of the Indian labour movement and anti-colonial politics. To reconstruct some of the place-based dynamics of the dispute I engage with material from the papers of Trades Councils, organisations which act as umbrella bodies of trade unionists in particular towns and cities in the UK. Often reflecting strong ‘rank and file’ involvement they provide a key lens on the relations between the labour movement and place-based political cultures (Clinton, 1986). Finally, the papers of the British TUC have been used to situate the strikes in relation to the dynamics of the UK labour movement and because they include a number of writings on the dispute by Surat Ali, a prominent figure in the dispute in Britain.

Surat Ali, an Indian seafarers' organiser and Communist who was secretary of the Colonial Seamen's Association, was linked to the All-India Seamen's Union, and emerged as a key intermediary with officials during the strikes (see Sherwood, 2004).<sup>1</sup> He ran the Hindustani Social Club which was a key site for organising in London's East-End and was where a number of organisations including the Colonial Seamen's Association were located. Based in the premises of an old pub which Ali rented from the London, Midland and Scottish Railway 'at an annual charge of £110' (New Scotland Yard, 1940: 81), its location in Poplar was very close to key strategic sites for shipping routes to India such as the East India Dock Basin. Ali's writings relating to the strikes indicate some of the key dynamics of the events, and give helpful indications of some of the means through which the strike was articulated politically. These writings also help to position the strikes in relation to the broader cultures of Indian seafarer's organising trajectories, themes which are developed in the next section.

### **The 1939 Indian Seafarers' Strikes and Trajectories of Resistance**

The disputes in early September developed into a transnational wave of strike action which lasted until at least December, 1939. Striking seafarers utilised the spatial and temporal pressures of the outbreak of the Second World War, which had intensified the need to move ships quickly, as a key moment of leverage. The requisitioning of ships by the British Government for war purposes was also used a key moment to win demands as it involved the renegotiation of seafarers' contracts or articles (Clan Line, 1939). The crew of the *Umvoti* which struck in early September in Durban who 'refuse[d] to sail to England owing to fear of submarines' emphasises the significance of the extreme dangers posed to merchant seafarers by a war that India had been brought into without consultation (Government of India Commerce Department, 1939). The intense pressure the strikes exerted on shipping companies emerge in a report given by Mr Greany at a meeting of the Shipping Federation in November, 1939.

Greany noted that 'the Lascar crew question' had 'been rather a novel problem for the Federation'. He noted that issues had started at the very outbreak of the war 'when several vessels carrying Lascar crews were requisitioned. Immediately the Lascar crews struck for more money. As these vessels were urgently needed for Government purposes, [...] no time was allowed, owing to transport problems, to discuss wages or to attempt any form of resistance. As a result, within the first few days we were faced with very large increases in

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<sup>1</sup> While he was often referred to as Surat Alley, here I follow Balachandran, 2012 and Hossain, 2013 in referring to him as Surat Ali.



the Lascar crews' rates: they rapidly went up to 100 per cent increase in wages, plus a number of other perquisites, even down to soap. As more ships came over they were infected, and rapidly we got to a state of chaos' (Shipping Federation, 1939). Greany's account emphasises how by targeting the strategic moment of the outbreak of the war, and the requisitioning of vessels for government purposes, the strike gained significant traction.

Greany attributes the swift concessions won by some strikers both to this strategic moment, but also the unexpected character and reach of the strikes. As a representative of a key shipping interest group, Greany offers the ship-owners' perspective on the dispute. An interview conducted on the 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1939 by officials of the International Department of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) with Surat Ali, in his capacity as London Representative of the All-India Seamen's Federation, offers a very different perspective. In the interview Surat Ali observed that 'when war broke out there was a spontaneous revolt among the Indian seamen in the ports of Great Britain' (Ali, 1939). He noted that 'They had learned of the war bonus granted to British seamen, and demanded that their average wage of 35/-, per month should be increased by 100 per cent, and that a war risk bonus of £10 for the round trip (which lasted anything from 12-18 months) should be paid'. Ali's interview made clear that while this action had been partially successful, the strikers were subjected to harsh repression.

He observed that the majority of crews had won significant concessions, particularly in ships which had been requisitioned by the Admiralty. Ali noted however that subsequently the ship-owners had 'decided it was too much, and charged the men with breaking their contracts and with refusing to obey the commands of the captains' and that at the time of the interview seven to eight hundred seafarers were imprisoned across the empire with approximately four hundred being held in British prisons (Ali, 1939). Surat Ali's positioning of the strikes as a 'spontaneous revolt' was of a piece with the broader framing of these events in left organising in relation to the disputes. A CPGB statement on the strikes issued on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 noted that 'After the War broke out on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, the All India Seamen's Federation attempted to come to some agreement with the Shipowner's Federation. But the shipowners were not interested. At the same time, and in consequence of the shipowner's attitude a spontaneous movement began amongst the Indian seamen' (CPGB, 1939: 35). That the statement gave S. Alley as a contact for donations at resolutions at the Hindustani Social Club in Poplar also suggests the statement was at least in part authored by Ali.

While it may have been strategically useful for Surat Ali to present the strikes as

spontaneous, these events were related to longer histories of organising. Surat Ali himself had been a central figure in the formation in 1935 of the Colonial Seamen's Association (CSA) in 1935 to challenge the effects of the National Shipping Assistance Act. While the Act did not have explicit provisions relating to labour, the British National Union of Seamen (NUS) used it strategically to attempt to exclude seafarers of colour from the tramp shipping labour market (Featherstone, 2019). Surat Ali was secretary of the organisation and the Barbadian Chris Braithwaite aka Jones, was the president (Høgsbjerg, 2011). This built on Ali's longer trajectory of involvement in union organising related to Indian seafarers which in turn was related to earlier histories of organising which had links to key Communist figures such as Shapurji Saklatvala (see Callaghan, 1993, p. 99-100, Edmonds, 2020: 19-20, Griffin, 2018, Sherwood, 2004). Ali also had linkages key figures such as Mr M Daud, the President of the Indian Seamen's Union (Tabili, 1994: 103).

Such transnational linkages were central to the ways in which grievances relating to the treatment of Indian seafarers on British ships circulated between different organisations and sites. Thus a meeting of the General Council of the National Trades Union Federation held in Bombay, in May, 1935 adopted a motion, moved by Jamnadas Mehta, the President of the Federation, severely criticising the British Parliamentary Labour Party's (PLP) position in relation to the Shipping Assistance Act (National Trade Union Federation, 1935). The motion condemned members of the PLP for demanding the discharge 'of Indian seamen', indicating how such organising challenged the investment of the sections of the British left in colonial imaginaries and racialized divisions of labour (Hyslop, 2009b, Virdee, 2014). This resolution also emphasises the role of transnational labour organising in contesting discrimination and poor conditions faced by Indian seafarers in the years before the strikes.

Central to such organising was the activity of Aftab Ali who was from a wealthy family in Sylhet and had become a major figure in Indian seafarers' unionism after running away to Calcutta and joining as ship bound for America as a stoker (Adams, 1987: 60). He went on to represent Indian seafarers at the International Labour Organisation, was on the executive of the NTUF, was general secretary of the Calcutta based Indian Seamen's Union (ISU), and was chair of the All-India Seamen's Federation (Adams, 1987: 60-61, Balachandran, 2012: 276-78). Ali was one of two representatives of Indian seafarers who met Walter Citrine and figures from the NUS including the General Secretary W.R. Spence after Jamnadas Mehta had lodged a complaint relating to the TUC's exclusionary position in relation to Indian seafarers during the debates on the Shipping Assistance Act (TUC, 1938). Aftab Ali's presence at this meeting indicates the increasingly strong connections with Indian seafaring

unions which were shaped by the Colonial Seamen's Association through the late 1930s. By 1939 the organisation had 'amalgamated with the All-India Seamen's Federation' and was described in a Scotland Yard Report as 'a London branch of Aftab Ali's union' (New Scotland Yard, 1939, Visram, 2000). The organisation had developed contacts in 1938 with the ISU in Calcutta in 1938 an affiliate of the All-India Seamen's Federation (AISF), which was a significant, if short-lived, attempt to transcend some of the animosities that existed within seafarers' unions in India, particularly between organisations in Bombay and Calcutta (Colonial Seamen's Association, 1938, see Ahuja, 2006, Balachandran, 2012). Ali noted in a memorandum on the CSA that due to the continuation of practices such as bribery the AISF and ISU had sent a representative, Tahsil Miah, to 'work in close collaboration with CSA'. In a letter to the TUC Surat Ali noted that they had collaborated effectively observing that 'we have been able to do something very useful during recent months' and that the 'Indian Seamen's Union and Trade Union Movement in India (Mr N.M. Joshi) have been kept informed of our activities' (Ali, 1938). Tahsil Miah had 'deserted his ship at Liverpool in February 1938' and had been 'sent to the East End to agitate among Indian seamen' (India Office, 1939: 21-22). The use by Indian seafaring unions here of desertion to transport an activist from India to London emphasises the interplay between unofficial and official forms of maritime organising and resistance (see Miller, 2020, Rediker, 1988).

Ali's writings then position the strikes in relation to histories of organising among Indian seafarers and draw attention to a number of long-standing grievances. While these organising trajectories and connections were an important context for the strikes they certainly did not over-determine the ways in which they occurred or were conducted. The intensity of the strikes dramatically re-articulated these organising practices, in part through the sustained blockading of ships in port. Such organising, however, prepared the terrain for the strikes in important ways even if the impetus for the strikes themselves came more from subaltern activity and initiative. The CPGB statement issued about the strikes noted that in 1939 the 22<sup>nd</sup> July had been observed 'as All-India-Seamen's Day in every port of India, and also in London and other ports in the United Kingdom' and was used to put forward a number of demands including 'fifty per cent increase in wages, the appointment of a Recruitment Committee in every port in India which would be a check against bribery and corruption' (CPGB, 1939). In London it was marked by an afternoon 'Meeting of All Indian Seamen and Ex-Seamen Only to Discuss the Demands of the All-India Seamen's Federation', chaired by Aftab Ali, as part of a two day 'Indian Workers' Conference', held at 'The United Ladies Tailors' Union Hall' in Whitechapel (Indian Workers' Conference, 1939).

Prior to the strikes figures like Aftab Ali forged connections with the labour movement in different parts of Britain. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1939 Aftab Ali, the President of the Indian Seamen's Federation, spoke at a meeting of Glasgow Trades and Labour Council, an invitation which had been facilitated by Krishna Menon and Kay Cobb of the India League. The minutes record that Ali was 'listened to with the greatest interest' and that the Council had been 'shocked to learn the extent to which bribes governed recruitment of Indian Seamen'. They noted that Aftab Ali 'stated he was going back to India to advise direct action in which he hoped to receive the support of the British Seamen's Union' (Glasgow Trades Council Minutes, 1939). Exploring such trajectories situates the strikes in relation to ongoing processes of organising, positioning spatial tactics such as blockades and the circulation of resistance as part of broader articulations of dissent. It also offers an alternative account to existing work which has tended to position the strikes as a rather singular, transformative event (Balachandran, 2012: 263, Kirkby and Monk, 2016: 238). The next section discusses the terms on which subaltern agency was constituted through the ways the strikes circulated.

### **Subaltern Agency and the Spatial Politics of Circulation**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1939, a strike by 'the lascar crew of the *SS Oxfordshire*', a Bibby Line Steamer, occurred while the ship was 'being fitted out as a hospital ship in the King George V Dock'. An official account of 'Unrest Among Indian Seamen' noted that 'Of the large number of demands' made by the crew 'most were immediately sanctioned, but the crew stood out for an 8-hour day and a monthly ration of ½ lb tobacco, demands which the owners refused to grant. The strike terminated on the 26<sup>th</sup> October when the men returned to work' (India Office, 1939a). The concessions granted to the striking seafarers on the *SS Oxfordshire*, which included 'a £10 war bonus and a 100% increase in wages' were widely seen as having had an impact on the crews of other vessels. Thus a report of the 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 notes that it was 'the successful outcome of the strike on the *SS Oxfordshire*' which 'led to the strike on the *SS Clan Alpine*' (India Office, 1939d).

Accounts relating to the *SS Oxfordshire* indicate some of the dynamics through which strike action circulated between different crews, or at least the terms on which officials understood such circulation. A memorandum on Unrest Among Indian Seamen of 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 noted that 'The strike fever proved contagious and spread to the *SS 'Clan Alpine*', berthed in the West India dock. The pay of the crew had been raised by 100% but they demanded also a bonus of £10. Persisting in their refusal to return to work, they were arrested and prosecuted

for disobedience of lawful orders, under Section 225 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1894' (India Office, 1939: 21-22). The *Clan Alpine's* crew had, however, already been involved in strike action prior to arriving in West India Dock. A Port of London Authority Police report of 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1939 notes that 'on arrival at Cape Town from Calcutta on the 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1939, 'the whole of the native crew refused to sail for English ports through the war zone, unless they received an increase in pay for the extra risk entailed' (Police report, 1939: 3-4). Through engaging with the strikes on ships such as the SS Oxfordshire and SS Clan Alpine this section draws attention to three important aspects of the way the strikes engaged with circulation, providing an alternative to officials use of metaphors of 'fever' and 'contagion'.

Firstly, as the case of the *SS Oxfordshire* indicates central to the strikes was the circulation of unofficial knowledge between crews of different ships. Official reports indicate significant transmission of information between the 'lascar' crews of different ships, particularly regarding concessions won through strike action. In the case of the *SS Oxfordshire* the fact that it was in the King George V Dock being refitted would have facilitated seafarers from the crew being in touch with other ships. Oral histories of Sylheti seafarers conducted by Caroline Adams in the 1980s some of which bear on experiences from the 1930s and 1940s indicate strong networks of unofficial communication linked to particular sites of association such as cafés run by ex-seafarers (see Adams, 1987).

The circulation of such unofficial knowledges led to seafarers' demands shifting as they circulated between different ports; Balachandran also suggests that seafarers were savvy about which ports they thought they could win the best concessions in (Balachandran, 2012: 264). In the case of the *SS City of Manchester* of the Ellermen Line, the ship was about to sail from Tilbury Dock when the 'lascar members of the crew' 'intimated their refusal to undertake the voyage and went ashore' (India Office, 1939: 21-22). A police report of 15<sup>th</sup> November noted that 'The seamen in this case had been granted a 25% increase in wages to cover war risks when they signed on the ship at Colombo in September, and on learning after their arrival in England, that some crews had been given a 100% increase, they demanded similar treatment' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 24). As in the case of the *SS McAlpine* the action of the crew had in part been inspired by 'the success of the strike on the *SS Oxfordshire*'.

Details of the strike aboard the *SS City of Manchester* indicate the practices through which ships were effectively blockaded in port. On the 11<sup>th</sup> November when the ship was 'about to sail from Tilbury Docks, 76 lascars of her crew refused to obey orders and marched down the

gangway' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 24). This emphasises that the crew had not only prevented the ship from leaving port, but had also physically deserted the ship. The latter practice of actively walking off and leaving the ship would have helped to facilitate the circulation of news and knowledge of the strike activity of the crew. Like the seafarers on the *SS Clan McAlpine*, however, they were arrested and charged with three offences under the Merchant Shipping Act 1894, and 'sentenced to one month's imprisonment on each count (concurrently and ordered to forfeit two day's pay' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 24).

Secondly, the circulation of the strikes between ships docked in London was in part facilitated by concerted action on the part of London-based Indian seafarers' organisers. The memorandum on 'Unrest among Indian seamen' concurred that the 'prolongation of the strike on the *SS Oxfordshire* was in large measure due to the activities' of Surat Ali and Tahsil Miah (India Office, 1939). Both Ali and Miah had links to broader left and anti-colonial organisations and networks including the Communist Party and the India League which provided material resources and facilitated the circulation of literature on the strikes and information about meetings. A police report of 29<sup>th</sup> November notes that 'Leaflets urging Indian crews to strike for higher wages and war bonuses and to demand official recognition of their union (the All-India Seamen's Federation), have been distributed by Ali and his associates at many British ports' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 53).

The production of such literature emphasises the connections of the strikes to broader anti-colonial networks and organising (Ahmed, 2012: 74-75). An account of 7<sup>th</sup> November indicates that 'notices in English, Bengali and Urdu for strikers' meetings have been cyclostyled at the India League office' of V.K. Krishna Menon on the Strand (India Office, 1939b: 14). The main organisation representing the Indian Congress in the UK, and the India League had strong connections with Labour movement; Menon was briefly prospective Labour parliamentary candidate for Dundee (Visram, 2002). The account noted that 'Menon himself is taking up seamen's grievances with Members of Parliament', he also raised the disputes in his position as a member of the international committee of the National Council of Civil Liberties (NCCL, 1939). The account notes, however, that he found 'it difficult to make the necessary direct contacts with the lascar element' relying on Tahsil Miah to 'accomplish this for him' (India Office, 1939b, 15).

Menon, however, failed to make the seafarers' strikes part of the public discourse of the India League. At 'a public meeting convened by him under the auspices of the India League to discuss the Indian political situation' at Conway Hall on the 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 he avoided making reference to the strikes and to 'the grievances of Indian seamen'. This was 'an

omission which was much resented by Surat Ali and Tahsil Miah, who were both present at the meeting' (India Office, 1939c: 31), emphasising some of the ways in which the articulations between anti-colonialism and maritime labour were contested during the strikes. It also suggests that while at strategic moments Menon was willing to subordinate discussion of the strikers' demands and imprisonment to broader concerns with Indian independence, figures such as Tahsil Miah and Surat Ali sought to directly link anti-colonialism and maritime labour.

These tensions indicate some of the contested positionalities of key actors in relation to the circulations of resistance, strikes and repression. It mapped on to struggles between Surat Ali and Menon to develop support among Indians in the East-End of London. In this respect Menon's 'failure to save the crew of the *'Clan Alpine'* from imprisonment' was also reported to have 'lost him a great deal of popularity in the East End' (India Office, 1939c: 30). These different figures were also positioned in different ways to the unequal mobilities which were generated through the strike. Thus Tahsil Miah was deported from Britain to India on the *SS Tribesmen* of the Harrison Line on 9<sup>th</sup> December, with a charge for desertion from his ship in 1938; the desertion charge arguably being used as cover for action against his role in the strikes (India Office, 1940: 73).

Thirdly, in line with Ahuja's arguments about the dynamic spatial relations of maritime labour the terms of seafarers' mobility were not merely a backdrop to the strikes. While the strike on board the *SS City of Manchester* gives an indication of how demands moved with seafarers between ports, the terms of seafarers' mobility was also a key grievance in some of the disputed ships. The strikes intersected with struggles over the terms on which crews were transferred between different routes and ships. Customary interpretations of the 'transfer clause in the articles of agreement for Indian seamen' enabled 'shipowners to deploy their Indian crews more flexibly, and the latter to prolong their engagements' (Balachandran, 2012: 236). Grievances over such transfers were central to the actions of a number of crews during the disputes.

The Chief Superintendent of the Scotland District, for example, noted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1939 that '[the] Lascar deck ratings of the Anchor line *Cicassia* had refused to transfer to the *'Britannia'* and are being prosecuted.' It is significant in this regard that some of the original crew of the *Britannia* had been on strike. Thus a report of the 2<sup>nd</sup> November noting that the 'Deck Lascars' of the *Britannia* had 'refused to sail in the vessel and were prosecuted' (Chief Superintendent (Scotland District), 1939: 38a). A few days later the Chief Superintendent (Scotland District) reported that he had 'been informed by the Anchor Line that the Lascar

Deck ratings who refused to transfer to the *SS Britannia* on the 2<sup>nd</sup> instant have been released from Gaol and sent to Liverpool to join the “*Britannia*”.’ This suggests that contestation of transfers were used as moments of strategic leverage to win concessions (see also Balachandran, 2008: 60-1).

Thus the same official noted that on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November ‘a Lascar crew was transferred to the requisitioned SS “Manela” of the British India Steam Navigation Company at Lerwick, in the Shetland Islands, by a Lascar Transfer Officer from the Aberdeen Office. ‘Before the men left London the Owners agreed to give each Lascar a mattress and blanket, warm clothing and £10 bonus in addition to 100% increase in Wages and the Agreement was endorsed accordingly. The transfer was carried through without a hitch, and the old crew returned to London for repatriation to India’ (Chief Superintendent (Scotland District), 1939: 38b). On 9<sup>th</sup> November, they noted that an attempt had been made to ‘transfer the Lascar Crew of the ‘Clan McNeill’ to the ‘Clan Buchanan’ bound for Cape Town via Liverpool, but the men refused to transfer unless given a bonus of £2, and the old crew of the ‘Clan Buchanan’ have taken her round to Liverpool’ (Chief Superintendent (Scotland District), 1939: 38e). The Clan Line papers record that the “Clan Macarthur” and “Perthshire” from Australia were forced to call at Colombo on their homeward bound for new crews as ‘the present men refusing to carry on unless promised discharge at Colombo’ (Clan Line, 1939).

Demands raised in the strike also speak to the ways in which seafarers were concerned to ensure that their wages would reach back to their families during the conflict indicating the important work seafarers did in maintaining spatially stretched kinship networks. Atur Miah, of *SS Clan Ross*, and Abdul Majid, of the *SS Clan MacBrayne*, who represented the ‘lascar crews’ of both ships in an interview with figures from the Board of Trade on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1939 demanded that half their wages were ‘to be paid to the High Commissioner for India in London’ so that money would be ‘sent to the wives and heirs of the men working on the ships if they so desire’ (Miah and Majid, 1939). Struggles over transfers spoke to longstanding grievances and histories of resistance by Indian seafarers. In August 1930, the crew of the *SS Clan Sinclair* had been briefly imprisoned in while in Glasgow after refusing to transfer to the *Halesius* which was bound for Buenos Aires because ‘they would not go with Capt Hawley’ (Balachandran, 2012: 238-9). This incident situates the use of mass imprisonment of crews during the 1939 strikes as part of a broader usage of incarceration against forms of collective resistance by Indian seafarers. The harsh repression meted out to the strikers led to support and solidarity for the strikers from trade unionists and anti-colonial organisations which is discussed in the final section.



### **Solidarities, Place and Circulation**

As Surat Ali indicated in his interview with officials from the TUC the repression of the strikes was harsh, particularly as they continued into November. Prosecutions and imprisonment under the provisions of the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act, which gave captains near dictatorial powers over their crews, became central to the official response to the strikes. These powers were used to repress attempts to blockade ships in port and to ensure their swift departure. The reaction to the mass imprisonment of striking seafarers indicates the relations between the circulation of the strikes and solidarity. On 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1939, fifty five Indian seafarers from the *SS Clan Cumming*, a Clan Line vessel, were convicted at Glasgow's J.P. Court, of Contravention of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1894 and sentenced to four weeks in Barlinnie Prison (Finlayson, 1939).

The seafarers' incarceration was contested by the city's influential Trades and Labour Council, in part prompted by a letter from the 7/10 Branch of the Transport and General Workers Union, which represented transport workers in Partick, a working-class district of Glasgow adjoining the River Clyde. In mid-October Glasgow Trades and Labour Council drew up a proposal to develop a 'Committee under the auspices of the Trades Council, which would consist of three members of the Trades Council, three members of the India League and three members of the National Union of Seamen' (Glasgow Trades and Labour Council, 1939). This committee arguably developed the nascent connections shaped by Aftab Ali's presence at the Trade's Council in August of that year.' These solidarities also reflected the broader political make-up of the Trade's Council which was subject to 'a strong Communist influence', Arthur Brady the secretary, for example, had been expelled from the Labour Party for 'taking the chair with Harry Pollitt of the CPGB at a United Front Meeting' (Knox and MacKinlay, 1995: 176, Morgan, 1989:151).

The response to the circulation of the strikes was shaped by solidarities which were facilitated through particular articulations of left political cultures in particular places. The Trades Council shaped a strong opposition to the war declaring at a specially convened conference on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1939 that this was a 'War of imperialist antagonisms in which the workers should have no part' (Glasgow Trades' and Labour Council, 1939). The initiative for a solidarity committee with the Indian seafarers reflects the influence of Kay Cobb the Secretary of the Glasgow branch of the India League who was also strongly involved in the Trade's Council, where she represented the National Union of Clerks and often acted as a

teller at meetings. Cobb was in regular contact with Krishna Menon, arranging for him to speak at the Trade's Council in late November, 1939. Correspondence between Menon and Cobb also signals both connections with the leading Communist Palme Dutt, and Menon's desire to keep such connections rather submerged and 'carried out with discretion and wisdom' (Menon, 1939: 216).

A meeting of the Trades Council on 18<sup>th</sup> October noted that the secretary had 'had a meeting with representatives of the India League at which the position of Indian seamen in Glasgow was very fully considered.' The proposed committee in support of the striking Indian seafarers which arose from this meeting was stymied by W.R.L. Spence, the General Secretary of the NUS, who declared that he 'did not agree to members of his Union being represented on the proposed committee' (Glasgow Trades' Council, 1939). Given the concerted racism that structured the NUS throughout the interwar period, it is unsurprising the organisation refused to offer support for the strikes; this was despite Indian seafarers making contributions to the NUS's pension fund which they were not themselves beneficiaries (Featherstone, 2019, Tabili, 1994: 84). Spence did write to the Home Secretary requesting the release of Indian seafarers from British prisons, but only after being prompted to do so by Walter Citrine of the TUC (Citrine, 1939).

The Trades Council nonetheless attempted to support the imprisoned seafarers. Arthur Brady reported on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1939 that 'he had seen the Governor of Barlinnie Prison and was informed that the Seamen had been liberated the day after they were in prison' (Glasgow Trades' Council, 1939). He also made a direct critique of the use of Barlinnie for holding striking seafarers which went beyond a narrow civil liberties critique of this use of the prison. 'It would appear', he argued, 'that Barlinnie was a sort of compound for Indian Seamen to suit the caprice of the Ship Owners' (Glasgow Trades Council, 1939). This indicates the Trade's Councils concern that Barlinnie was being used as a 'holding cell' for the striking seafarers in the interests of shipping companies like Clan Line.

Brady's critique of this use of the prison was prescient. A representative from Cayzer Irvine, a Glasgow-based company linked to Clan Line, wrote to Sir John Colville, the Secretary of State for Scotland, complaining that 'we are short of Native seamen to man various vessels which we are anxious to sail in convoys, we should appreciate your consideration for the release of the 55 ratings' (Cayzer Irvine, 1939). The transcript of a phone call from a Mr Marshall of the Clan Line, emphasised the urgency with which they 'required' the seafarers, noting that the SS Clan Farquhar was 'due to sail at noon tomorrow for Liverpool under convoy, but she is 23 engineering ratings short. 33 of these are in gaol' and that the shipping

company was ‘most anxious that the lascars be released in time to travel by the 9.30 train from Glasgow to Liverpool tonight’ (Marshall, 1939). The transcript also indicates that the Clan Line was in direct communication with the Governor of Barlinnie ‘as to the exact time of letting out and other details’ (Marshall, 1939).

This correspondence underlines Brady’s suspicion that Barlinnie was being put to a strategic use to bolster the interests of the shipping companies. Barlinnie continued to be used to hold deserters from Clan Line ships in the early 1940s, who were swiftly released and placed back on Clan Line vessels, after short periods in the prison.<sup>2</sup> This interplay between the racialized construction of maritime labour, the strategic use of incarceration and legal provisions emphasise the colonial power relations through which race functioned in maritime spaces (Mawani, 2018: 179). Glasgow Trade’s Council’s interventions also speak to the role of left and anti-colonial political networks in enabling the circulation of the strikes and the challenges posed by circulation for articulations of labour solidarity. Thus Brady noted at the meeting on the 12<sup>th</sup> December that ‘The Sailors had been shipped again and had disappeared’. The Trade’s Council was also in touch with Tahsil Miah. Brady reported to the meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> October that Tahsil Miah of the All Indian Seamen’s Federation at 179 High Street Poplar, E14 ‘could be communicated with for all information’, indicating that the Trades Council were in touch with figures like Miah (Glasgow Trade’s Council, 1939). That this was the address of the Hindustani Social Club underlines the significant role of this space, in terms of organising among Indian seafarers in the East-End and in co-ordinating the support for the striking seafarers. The statement released by the CPGB on the ‘Indian Seamen and the War’ which ‘was being distributed to the local Trades Councils and to the Trades Union Branches with the instructions to include it in their propaganda, and to send resolutions to the India Office, the High Commissioner for India’ gave Ali’s address at the Hindustani Social Club as the contact for resolutions and donations (CPGB, 1939). The statement noted resolutions had been passed by Shoreditch and Stepney Trades Councils, both in London’s Eastend, supporting the demands of the Indian seamen and calling for ‘the release of the crew of the *SS Clan Alpine*’ (CPGB, 1939).

Police reports signal the important role of the Hindustani Social Club as key to providing ‘infrastructures of solidarity’ during the dispute by offering support to seafarers who had prevented their ships from sailing (Kelliher, 2018: 4). A New Scotland Yard Report dated 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1939 notes that forty seafarers from the *Clan McAlpine* attended ‘the

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<sup>2</sup> See accounts in Scottish Record Office HH57/ 1025.

headquarters of the Colonial Seamen's Union [sic], 179 Poplar High Street on the 25<sup>th</sup> October' where they were harangued by Ali and Odut [Tahsil Miah]. After attending the Hindustani Social Club 'they went to the Board of Trade Office and stated they would not sail unless they were granted 50% additional pay, better food and a bonus of £10. They refused to return to the ship and police had to be called before they would leave the Board of Trade Office. They then went back to 179 High Street, Poplar' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 24). While other accounts suggest the Club was 'not much political' (Qureshi, 1987: 158, Ahmed, 2012: 79), it would appear the political role of the Club was intensified during the strikes. A police report during the strikes observed that 'Communist and Anti-British Propaganda amongst Indian pedlars and unemployed lascars, etc, in the East End of London had increased greatly during the past few weeks' and much of this work was 'being carried out in the Hindustani Social Club and the Hindustani Community House' (New Scotland Yard, 1939: 59).

Maegan Miller has argued that sites such as café's in the dockside areas of port cities 'served numerous functions' and were 'the epicenter of grounded learning and worlding among seafarers'. She notes that some 'cafes were known internationally, such as Ayub Ali's cafe and house in London which was "famous among Sylheti sailors around the world' (Miller, 2020b: 24, see also Abraham, 2015). The Hindustani Social Club was central to the political articulation of seafarers' demands through the strikes and a key site in terms of material solidarity. The organising networks around the Club were significant, however, in attempts to get seafarers to honour an agreement between the AISF and the ship owners' agents in Calcutta which was mediated by Mr H.S. Suhrawardy, Commerce and Labour Minister of Bengal' (Ali, 1939). The key concessions in the agreement were a 25% increase in wages and 25% as war-risk pay which were to be effected retrospectively from November 1<sup>st</sup> (Advance, 1939).

After the agreement had been reached Aftab Ali, who had also been involved in earlier attempts to broker a deal in September, released a statement, widely circulated in the Indian press, which appealed 'to all Indian Seamen in employ particularly those who are now in foreign Ports to take note of this happy settlement and not to create any further trouble by refusing to proceed on their respective voyages' (Advance, 1939). Surat Ali, as London representative of the AISF, met various crews to convince them to accept the deal. There was, however, significant reluctance to accept the agreement, which fell short of some of the concessions that had been won by some crews during the strikes. On the 19<sup>th</sup> December Surat Ali was 'visited by a number of lascars from the *SS Clan McNeill* and asked whether the crew

should strike for better terms' as there was a view that the provisions 'in the Calcutta agreement were not sufficiently favourable' (India Office, 1940: 73). The next morning Surat Ali went to the docks and advised the crew 'to accept the terms, telling them that it was a provisional agreement and that after four or five months the question of demanding better terms would be re-opened' (India Office, 1940: 73).

While his advice was 'accepted by the majority of the crew' a number of seafarers, who officials referred to as a 'hostile element' were 'not entirely satisfied.' Nonetheless the ship 'set sail according to schedule', emphasising the role of Surat Ali and the AISF in enforcing the Calcutta agreement and helping to ensure the timely departure of vessels. Surat Ali's brokering role between unions, shipping companies and seafarers meant that at key junctures of the dispute such as this he was involved in actions which were more about enforcing agreements with ship owners than representing the grievances of seafarers (see also Balachandran, 2012: 194-6). This also indicates the ambiguous positionality of seafaring unions in relation to processes of circulation and their distance from some of the dynamics 'from below' that shaped the strikes. That Aftab Ali sought to successfully present the ISU through the agreement as an advocate of 'responsible' unionism also demonstrates how these tensions related to different conceptualisations of seafarers' unionism. Thus Balachandran argues that 'thanks to fears of war time strikes and the ISU's keenness to appear as a moderate industry union' 'the British government also began to consult periodically with the ISU' (Balachandran, 2012: 262). That Surat Ali continued to engage with the grievances and disputes of Indian seafarers throughout the period of the war, demonstrates that articulations with their resistances and struggles continued (Ali, 1941).

## **Conclusions**

Writing in 1941 Surat Ali noted that the condition of Indian seafarers continued to be marked by grievances and inequality. He observed that while 'Indian Seamen' were 'braving the perils of enemy U-boats with courage and fortitude' the wages they were receiving still did 'not constitute a living wage' (Ali, 1941). That Indian seafarers still faced unequal conditions after the 1939 strikes emphasises that the events were part of longer set of struggles. Nonetheless the strikes had a major impact and both their timing and impressive geographical reach of the strike exerted intense pressure on Shipping Companies, the British imperial state and the Government of India and demonstrated that seafarers' collective agency could be exercised in powerful ways. Intervening in the unequal terms of seafarers' relation to

processes of circulation was central to this agency.

To trace different articulations of such agency and the pressure it exerted, this paper has explored the relation between trajectories of resistance, articulations of solidarity and interventions in processes of circulation. Tracing some of the ways in which collective subaltern agency was asserted through the strikes, eg through blockading ships in port and refusing to be transferred between vessels emphasises how these practices were shaped by intervening in the uneven, racialised processes through which imperial connections were forged. By locating the strikes at the intersection of overlapping networks of struggles informed by labour organising and anti-colonial politics the paper has demonstrated how these events were related to struggles over the relations between how forms of labour organizing and anti-colonial politics were envisioned. Engaging with the contrasting positionalities of different actors in relation to processes of circulation at specific junctures during the strike the paper has also highlighted key aspects of the ways in which subaltern resistances were negotiated through these events.

Pepijn Brandon and Aditya Sarkar have noted that in the current conjuncture powerful ‘ideological currents’ ‘pit the “rootless cosmopolitanism” of social progressivism against the grass-roots “authenticity” of whiteness, national pride, anti-immigration sentiment, and male supremacy’ (Brandon and Sarkar, 2019: 92). Engaging with the transnational strike action discussed here, and its intersections with placed struggles and articulations of solidarity in Glasgow and London, disrupt the limited forms of political imaginary and antagonism which Brandon and Sarkar critique. Doing so emphasises the importance of attending to the long histories in which differently placed workers have struggled against the uneven and racialised processes of circulation that have constituted capital and empire. Tracing some of the resistances which have brought these uneven dynamics into contestation in productive ways also emphasises the instability of the imperial underpinnings of contemporary logistics spaces.

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