

Of Fanás and Forecastles

1. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

[This is an extended version of a talk delivered at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in 2007. It was later published in the **Economic and Political Weekly** and is also reprinted in **Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean**, ed. Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr & Michael Pearson, Unisa Press, 2010]



'Dutch Galleon showing both a forecastle (left) and aftcastle (right) off Mauritius', 1600-1630, Hendrik Cornelisz Vroom (Wikimedia Commons)

Bangladeshis, like Armenians and Gujaratis, often tell stories about the unexpected places where their countrymen are to be found. One location I have never heard mentioned however, is a [website](#) maintained for the benefit of the Australian 'family history community': it was there that I came upon [the ship's manifest of the *William Stewart*](#), a 596 ton vessel that arrived in Sydney on November 8, 1854, having made the journey from England to Australia with a crew of forty-four.^[1]

INWARD.

No of the Crew and Passengers, arrived in the Ship *William Stewart* at Auckland, New Zealand, on the 11th of Novr, 1854, from the Port of London, to Sydney, New South Wales, &c. 1854

Name	Rank	Age	Place of Birth	Profession	Remarks
John	Master	42	London	Master	
James	Second Mate	35	London	Second Mate	
Thomas	Third Mate	30	London	Third Mate	
John	Boatman	25	London	Boatman	
James	Boatman	25	London	Boatman	
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The ship was captained by one Mr. Charles J. Riches, and had only a single mate, a Mr. Webb, of London. Of the others on the list only a handful (possibly seven or eight) were white sailors: the rest were lascars of various grades.

Who then were these lascars? The brief notations on the list reveal more than might be expected: although most of them were Muslims, there were some Christians and Hindus among them too. The oldest was a man of 48, from Sylhet, in what is now Bangladesh, and the youngest was a 16-year-old from Madras – but for the most part these men were in their twenties and thirties, by no means young, according to the standards of an age when English and American seamen commonly began their careers in their teens. The seniormost lascar was one Serang Mohammad, a thirty-two year old sailor from Bombay; next in seniority were the two tindals, of whom one was from Chittagong and the other from 'Bamnell', a place that has the distinction of being unknown to Google. For the rest, twelve of the lascars were from what might be called undivided Bengal – places such as Sylhet, Barisal, Noakhali, Calcutta and Howrah. Another six were from various ports along the east coast of India, including Madras; one of the seacunnies, Roderick by name, was probably a burgher from Colombo; two others were from Goa; two were Malay; two were probably Arab-African; and another two were, in the vocabulary of the time, 'Manila-men', meaning Filipino.

The crew of the *William Stewart* was by no means exceptional in its heterogeneity. The *Tynemouth*, a steamship of 1228 tons that sailed from Hong Kong to Australia in 1858, had a crew of 70, of whom thirty-six were white sailors, all English except for four Germans. The others were lascars of various grades, of whom seven were from Bengal. As for the rest they were from places too various to list severally: Daman, Cochin, Gorakhpur, Mungher, Bencoolen (off Sumatra), Massawah (in East Africa) and so on.



Three Lascars of the 'Viceroy of India' (1929) (Greenwich Maritime Museum)

On lists like these the term 'lascar' has so wide an application that we might well wonder where the word came from and what it meant. The term would appear to be an Anglo-Indian adaptation of the Persian/Urdu *lashkar/lashkari*, meaning 'soldier' or 'army'.^[i]

In passing between languages the word appears to have taken on the connotation of 'mercenary' or 'hired hand' and was applied in this sense to a certain kind of sailor. The transition seems to have occurred first in Portuguese, in which the words *laschar/lasquarim* have been in circulation since about 1600 CE: as with many other nautical terms, it was probably through a Lusitanian route that it entered English.^[ii] The nautical usage of the term is however, distinctively European: in the Indian subcontinent, for example, the word is still generally used to mean 'army' or 'militia'.^[iv] The extended meaning of 'sailor' would appear to have been introduced to the subcontinent by Europeans; when thus used today, it has a touch of both the exotic and the archaic. In sum, the word 'lascar' as used on the manifest of the *William Stewart*, belongs to two kinds of jargon, the nautical and the colonial, and its meaning is specific to those contexts.

[i] <http://mariners.records.nsw.gov.au/1854/11/024wil.htm>

[ii] See for example: Albert Barrère, & Charles Leland: **Dictionary of Slang , Jargon & Cant**, Ballantyne Press, 1889, & Sir Henry Yule, & A.C.Burnell.: **Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary Of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words And Phrases, And Of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical And Discursive**, (new ed. edited by William Crooke, B.A. London: J. Murray, 1903). The Persian *lashkar* is often traced to the Arabic 'askari meaning 'soldier' but this seems an unlikely link to me. The other possibility is that it is the Arabic 'askar/askari that derives from the Persian *lashkar* (such, indeed was the opinion of no less a philologist than the great Sir Henry Yule, of **Hobson-Jobson**). But this seems even more unlikely to me, for if this were so then there would have to be some accounting for fact that the Arabic word had, in the course of its travels, lost one consonant – 'l' – and acquired another, the guttural ' . There would have to be an accounting also for the plural of the Arabic word 'askar/askari which is *asâkir* (while *lashkar* can be used as a collective).

[iii] Cf. , The **Oxford English Dictionary**.

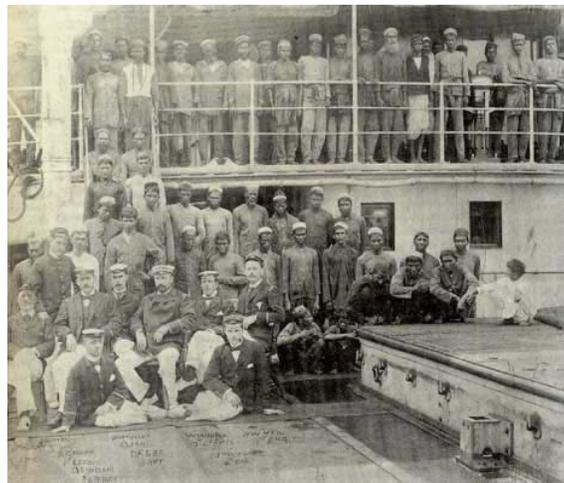
[iv] Some subcontinental dictionaries do not even list the nautical meaning of the word. See for instance, Dr. Shaikh Ghulam Maqsud Hilali's **Perso-Arabic Elements in Bengali**, (ed. Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq), Central Board for Development of Bengali, Dhaka, 1967.

2. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

So what then did the word 'lascar' mean in 19th century English?

When placed beside a crew list like that of the *William Stewart*, the **Oxford English Dictionary's** terse definition ('East Indian Sailor') would seem to be no less misleading than that of those well-known 19th century lexicographers, Albert Barrère and Charles Leland ('Malay sailor').

In actual usage the term was applied to all indigenous sailors of the Indian Ocean region – 'native' would have been the operative century category of the time – which is to say that it referred indifferently to Arabs, South Asians, Malays, East Africans, Filipinos and Chinese.



Lascars and European Officers of the steamship *Oolobaria*; 1890 (Memorial University Maritime History Archive [MHA])

That a single word should cast so large a net seems puzzling only from a landward, and contemporary, perspective. For European sailors of an earlier era, the word 'lascar' would have been paired with, and opposed to, another similar term, 'kanaka', which referred to the native seamen of the Pacific.^[1] With an ocean as a referent, it is scarcely surprising that both these terms cast their net very wide; scarcely surprising either that both suffered the same fate, drowning under the derogatory racial freightage that came to be loaded upon them.



Lascar crew members, Ballaarat, c. 1890 (Maritime History Archive <http://www.mun.ca/mha/>)

That lascars were a richly cosmopolitan group is beyond question. Yet, no matter whether they were from South Asia, East Africa, the Arabian Coast, or the Malay archipelago, these sailors were lumped together once they stepped on board.

Words often create their own reality: it is easy to imagine that living in the cramped bowels of sailing ships, coping with conditions of extreme danger and difficulty, men from every edge of the Indian Ocean came to share in an experience which, although similar to that of sailors everywhere, was also different in that it was salted with a particular kind of brine.

It is common nowadays to hear 'diversity' being spoken of as though it were some thrilling new invention. But it is unlikely that there were ever any more diverse collections of people – albeit only men – than the crews of merchant ships in the age of sail.^[ii]



[Herman Melville \(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

No one was more keenly aware of this, or represented it to better effect, than Herman Melville, especially in the startling 40th chapter of *Moby Dick*, where the *Pequod's* crew begin to sing, in a great outpouring of tongues, and it becomes apparent that this small Nantucket whaling ship is a floating Babel, with sailors from Holland, France, Malta, Long Island, the Azores, Tahiti, Sicily, the Isle of Man and China.

There is of course a token Lascar, whose contribution to the merriment consists of: “By Brahma! boys, it’ll be douse sail soon. The sky-born, high-tide Ganges turned to wind! Thou showest thy black brow Seeva!”^[iii] Nor is this the only Asian on the *Pequod*: Captain Ahab’s mysterious company of private harpooners consists, Melville tells us, of Parsees. The unlikeliness of this should cast no doubt either upon Melville’s curiosity or his powers of observation – for he was one of the very few 19th century writers who actually took the time to look at the world of the lascars with some attention.



St George’s Dock and St Nicholas Church, Liverpool, Brown & Rawcliff (Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives)

In his autobiographical novel, *Redburn*, based on his earliest experiences as a seaman, Melville writes of a vessel called the *Irrawaddy* which was docked in Liverpool when his own ship arrived there.

The *Irrawaddy* was a ‘country boat’, which was the term commonly applied to ships built in Asia, in the western style. In Liverpool the *Irrawaddy* and her lascar crew were something of a curiosity. “Every Sunday, crowds of well-dressed people came down to the dock to see this singular ship... It was amusing... to watch the old women with umbrellas, who stood on the quay staring at the Lascars, even when they desired to be private. These inquisitive old ladies seemed to regard the sailors as a species of wild animal, whom they might gaze at with as much impunity, as at the leopards in the Zoological Gardens.”^[iv]

[i] Cf. Chappell, David A.: *Double Ghosts; Oceanian Voyagers on EuroAmerican Ships*, M.E.Sharpe, New York, 1994.

[ii] On this subject see also, Isaac Land: “Many of the naval victories and lucrative seaborne enterprises of the early nineteenth century were made possible by the labor of foreign, colonial, or “minority” seamen whose contributions are largely forgotten today. Britain continued to rule the waves, but only by relying on Lascars (sailors from South Asia and neighboring regions) to make up for its own manpower shortages in the merchant fleet. At Trafalgar, about 15% of Nelson’s “British” sailors were in fact from overseas, largely from other European countries but also from Africa, Asia, and the Americas.”(Bread and Arsenic: Citizenship from the Bottom Up in Georgian London, *Journal of Social History*, Volume 39, Number 1, pp. 89-110, Fall 2005.)

[iii] *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville, Penguin Popular Classics, 1994, p. 176.

[iv] Herman Melville: *Redburn: His First Voyage, Being The Sailor Boy Confessions And Reminiscences Of The Son-Of-A-Gentleman In The Merchant Service*, Anchor Books, New York, 1957, p. 165.

3. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail



Liverpool Harbour (Peabody Essex Museum)

In **Redburn**, his autobiographical novel about his first voyage, Herman Melville tells the story of how he met the lascars of a ship called the *Irrawaddy*, in Liverpool.

Stepping on board the ship he found a group of lascars eating on the fo'c'sle deck: "Among them were Malays, Mahrattas, Burmese, Siamese, and Cinghalese. They were seated around 'kids' full of rice, from which, according to their invariable custom, they helped themselves with one hand, the other being reserved for quite another purpose. They were chattering like magpies in Hindostanee, but I found that several of them could also speak very good English. They were a small-limbed wiry, tawny set; and I was informed, made excellent seamen."^[i]

The chain of command on the *Irrawaddy* was no different from that of any other 'country boat' that made the crossing to England: such vessels might be built in India, they might be owned by Indian merchants, they might be manned entirely by lascars, but their officers were almost always white 'Free Mariners'.^[ii] The Captain of the *Irrawaddy* accordingly, was an Englishman, as were also the three mates, master and bo'sun. "These officers lived astern in the cabin where every Sunday they read the Church of England's prayers, while the heathen at the other end of the ship were left to their false gods and idols. And thus, with Christianity on the quarter-deck, and paganism on the fo'c'sle, the *Irrawaddy* ploughed the sea."^[iii]



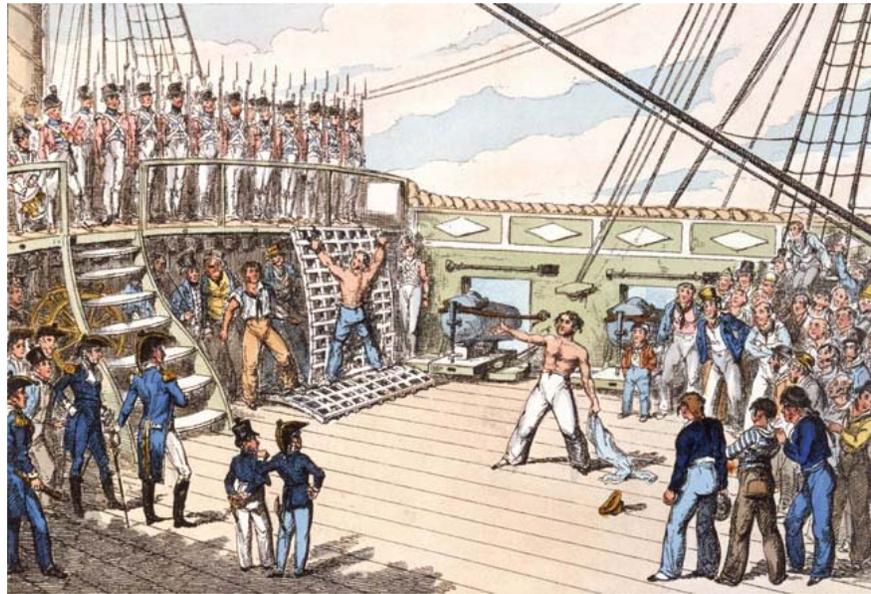
Lascars, Royal Albert Docks (Maritime History Archive)

One night, Melville got into a conversation with a lascar who gave his name as 'Dallabdoolmans'. Melville found that he spoke good English, and was quite communicative 'like most smokers'.

"It is a Godsend," wrote Melville, "to fall in with a fellow like this. He knows things you never dreamed of; his experiences are like a man from the moon – wholly strange, a new revelation. If you want to learn romance... take a stroll along the docks of a great commercial port. Ten to one, you will encounter Crusoe himself among the crowds of mariners from all parts of the globe."^[iv]

Melville wrote **Redburn** from memory, when his first voyage was long in the past, but his visit to the *Irrawaddy* clearly made a powerful impression, for more than a decade later he was able to recall Hindusthani/Bengali words, such as *sagoon*, teak. He probably got the lascar's name wrong, but the fact that he went to the trouble of recalling it is still of enormous significance – for in the annals of 19th century nautical writing the lascar, when he appears at all, is almost always a figure unnamed. Melville's account is almost unique in this regard, and his memory was perhaps not entirely to blame for the mangling of Dallabdoolman's name. It is easy to imagine that a nosy young writer who inquired after the name of an Asian or African transient in today's Europe would be given a similarly misleading answer. Lascars like Dallabdoolmans were probably wary of making themselves conspicuous, and this may be one reason why the names recorded on 19th century ships' manifests seem too sketchy to be real markers of personhood. For it is a fact that when a lascar stands out from the generality of his brethren in the historical record, it is almost always because he is the subject of some kind of legal or disciplinary action.

Thus for example, we have the case of Abdul Rhyme, in 1649, a lascar who was convicted while at sea, for having sex with a fellow member of his crew, a sixteen-year-old Londoner, by the name of John Durrant. Several witnesses testified that the relationship was consensual, but in the eyes of the ship's captain this served only to deepen the gravity of the offence since it implied that the English boy had willingly entered into a liaison with a 'Hindoosthan peon'.



The Point of Honour (caricature) by George Cruikshank; Robins, James & Co. 1825 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

The accused were both sentenced to forty lashes and it was specified that their wounds were to be rubbed with salt.^[v]

Or there is the 1814 case in which a lascar was whipped to an inch of his life in East London: the incident caught the attention of a magistrate and became something of a scandal. The lascar in question had been whipped by none other than his own serang who, on being arraigned, offered the defence that he was merely applying the custom of his trade, with the consent of his employers, the East India Company.^[vi]

[i] Herman Melville: *Redburn: His First Voyage, Being The Sailor Boy Confessions And Reminiscences Of The Son-Of-A-Gentleman In The Merchant Service*, Anchor Books, New York, 1957, p. 164.

[ii] See Anne Bulley's *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833*, Richmond, 2000, p. 207 – 210.

[iii] Herman Melville: *Redburn: His First Voyage, Being The Sailor Boy Confessions And Reminiscences Of The Son-Of-A-Gentleman In The Merchant Service*, Anchor Books, New York, 1957, p. 165.

[iv] *Ibid*, p. 166.

[v] B.R Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean*, New York University Press, New York, 1995, p. 146-7.

[vi] See Isaac Land, *Customs Of The Sea: Flogging, Empire, And The 'True British Seaman' 1770 To 1870*, *Interventions*, 3:2, 169-185, 2001.

4. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

The lives of lascars are of more interest today than ever before – for the very good reason that they were possibly the first Asians and Africans to participate freely, and in substantial numbers, in a globalized workspace.



"A crew of bemused Lascar sailors in London" (<http://www.bookdrum.com>)

They were among the first to travel extensively; the first to participate in industrial processes of work; the first to create settlements in Europe; the first to adapt to clock-bound rhythms of work-time (the shipboard regime of four-hour work-shifts, or watches, was one of the most exacting disciplinary regimes ever invented); and they were the first to be familiar with emergent new technologies (nautical engineering being itself one of the pioneering technologies of the industrial age). Not least, the lascars were among the first Asians to acquire a familiarity with colloquial (as opposed to book-learned) European languages.



Lascars (Museum of Croydon)

Lascars were thus in every sense the fore-runners of today's migratory computer technicians, nurses, high-tech workers, and so on.

Indeed they faced many of the same problems that contemporary Asian and African workers face, with their Western counterparts doing everything possible to limit their access to the most profitable labour markets. The British Navigation Laws of 1814 and 1823, for example, imposed rigid restrictions on the employment of lascars and played no small part in crippling the Indian shipping industry, which had shown itself to be fully capable of competing with its British counterpart.^[i]

Today, thanks to the work of pioneering scholars like Isaac Land, Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher, a great deal more is known about lascars than was the case even ten years ago.^[ii] We know for instance, that lascars were a substantial presence in London even in the seventeenth century, and possibly even earlier; we know that they could, by law, be paid a fraction of a white sailor's wage and that to hire them was an easy way to expand profit margins. We know that in many Asian ports, well-organized chain gangs recruited sailors through such methods as kidnapping and debt-bondage. We know that contractors would sometimes sell their kinsmen's children into virtual servitude and that often, on reaching their destination, unscrupulous shipmasters would abandon these young men and boys on the streets of London and Glasgow.

Yet it remains true that that much of what is known about lascars pertains to the shore: about their life at sea we know very little. Like many paperless migrants in the West today, lascars in the age of sail were probably suspicious of public scrutiny, so it behooves us to note that theirs is not the least of the many curtains of silence which we seek to pierce when we inquire into their lives.

But how, for example, in the Babel of tongues that was a lascar-manned sailship, did people communicate? Or, to put it differently, how on earth could they afford not to?

[i] For more on the curtailment of the Indian shipping industry, see Anne Bulley's **The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833** (Richmond, 2000), p.239, Asiya Siddiqi's *The Business World of Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy*, **Indian Economic & Social History Review**, vol. 19, Nos. 3-4, July-Dec. 1982, pp. 301-24 & Amalendu Guha's *Parsi Seths as Entrepreneurs: 1750-1850*, **Economic and Political Weekly**, V, No. 35, pp. M-107-15, 1970.

[ii] See for example: Rozina Visram's **Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947**, Pluto Press, London, 1986, & **Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History**, Pluto Press, London, 2002; Michael H Fisher's **Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857**, Permanent Black, 2004; & Isaac Land's *Customs Of The Sea: Flogging, Empire, And The 'True British Seaman' 1770 To 1870*, **Interventions**, 3:2, 169-185, 2001; 'Sinful Propensities': *Piracy, Sodomy, and Empire in the Rhetoric of Naval Reform in Britain and the United States, 1770-1870*, (forthcoming as a chapter in **Discipline and the Other Body**, Duke University Press; & *Bread and Arsenic: Citizenship from the Bottom Up in Georgian London*, **Journal of Social History**, Volume 39, Number 1, pp. 89-110, Fall 2005.

5. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail



Sampan, Sundarbans, 2005

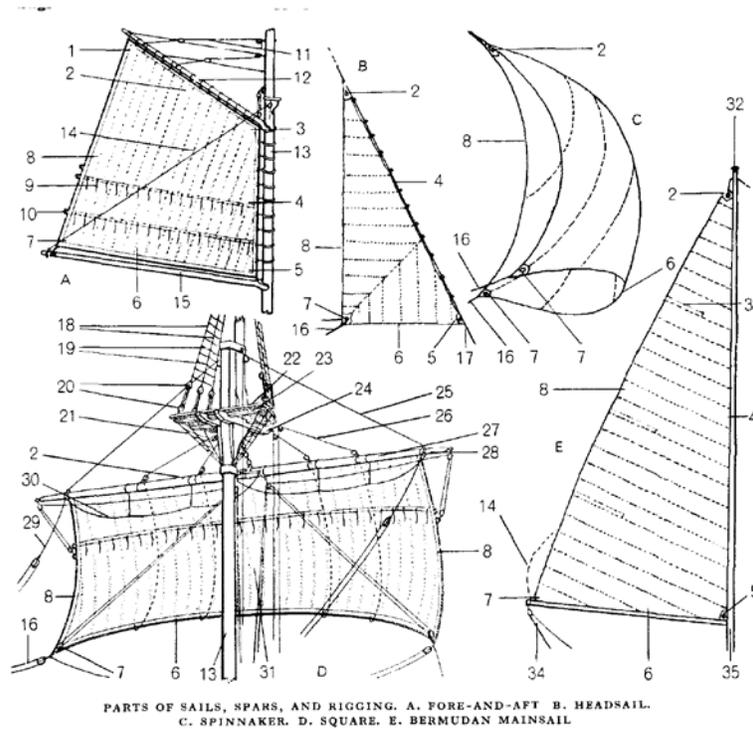
Sailing vessels are perhaps the most beautiful, most environmentally benign machines the world has ever known.

But what really sets a sailship apart from other machines is that its functioning is critically dependant on language: underlying the intricate web of its rigging, is an unseen net of words without which the articulation of the whole would not be possible.



Topsail schooner, Caribbean, 2007

To work a sailship efficiently, dozens of men must respond simultaneously to a single command; the failure to do so could make the difference between tacking a vessel neatly or tipping her over on her beam ends.



PARTS OF SAILS, SPARS, AND RIGGING. A. FORE-AND-AFT. B. HEADSAIL. C. SPINNAKER. D. SQUARE. E. BERMUDAN MAINSAIL.
 1. Peak. 2. Head. 3. Throat. 4. Luff. 5. Tack. 6. Foot. 7. Clew. 8. Leech. 9. Reef point. 10. Cringle. 11. Halyard. 12. Gaff. 13. Mast. 14. Topping lift. 15. Boom. 16. Sheet. 17. Forestay. 18. Topmast shrouds. 19. Ratlines. 20. Deadeyes. 21. Futtock shrouds. 22. Top. 23. Cross-trees. 24. Trestle-trees. 25. Lift. 26. Buntine. 27. Yard. 28. Yard-arm. 29. Brace. 30. Foot-rope. 31. Bunt. 32. Peak halyard. 33. Batten pocket. 34. Mainsheet. 35. Mainmast

(<http://www.arthursclipart.org/>)

But to learn a series of commands is not enough: on a sailship, as in a language, verbs need nouns to create meaning. And in one of its aspects, a sailship is precisely a vast, floating lexicon, with thousands of named parts – not just every rope, but every gasket, leech and pin has its own name.

This is why the technology of sail generated a shipload lexicographers:



'Baltimore Schooner', Baltimore, 2011. From the 16th century onwards, most maritime nations in Europe needed dictionaries of sail, many of which were enormous compilations, hundreds of pages in length.

It is one such that provides us with a refracted glimpse of the rigging of words that underlay the ropes of lascar-manned vessels.^[1] This is Lieutenant Thomas Roebuck's **An English And Hindostanee Naval Dictionary**, first published in Calcutta in 1811.

Born in 1781, Roebuck was a skilled linguist, who had served a rigorous apprenticeship under the famous John Borthwick Gilchrist, author of the first major Hindi-English dictionary. From 1806 to 1809 Roebuck was in Edinburgh assisting Gilchrist to prepare his lexicon. After that, while traveling to Calcutta on the Hon'ble Company Ship *Larkins*, Roebuck passed his time by compiling his **Naval Dictionary** with the help of the help of the ship's serang, a man called Ulee from Kachh (Cutch). Roebuck found Serang Ulee to be a 'most intelligent man', extremely 'willing and active', but on arriving in Calcutta, he took the precaution of cross-checking his entries with three other serangs, Shekh Duolut of 'Chutganw' (Chittagong in today's Bangladesh), Shekh Mohummud, from 'Koolabu' (possibly Colaba, which was then an island adjacent to Bombay), and Yoosoof Surhung, from 'G,hog,ha' (probably the coastal town of Ghogha, in Bhavnagar district in Gujarat).



[‘Gaffelaar’, Johannes Christiaan Schotel, 1822 \(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

Roebuck did not long survive the publication of his dictionary, dying of a fever in Calcutta at the age of 38.

But he did live to see the proof of his work's usefulness, for in 1813, two years after its first publication, his Dictionary was reprinted by the East India Company's booksellers in London. In 1882 it was revised and reissued by a missionary called George Small, under the title **A Laskari Dictionary Or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary Of Nautical Terms And Phrases In English And Hindustani**.^[ii] Under that name it continued to circulate well into the 20th century.

[i] Roebuck, Thomas Lt.: **An English And Hindostanee 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 Hindostanee Language**. Calcutta printed. London: Reprinted for Black, Parry & Co. Booksellers to the Hon. East India company, Leadenhall Street, 1813.

[ii] Roebuck, Capt. Thomas: **A Laskari Dictionary Or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary Of Nautical Terms And Phrases In English And Hindustani**, revised and corrected by George Small, W.H.Allen & Co., London, 1882.

6. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

By the time Lieutenant Thomas Roebuck compiled his lexicon of the Laskari language (*An English And Hindostanee Naval Dictionary*, first published in Calcutta in 1811) the dialect was already centuries old. The clearest proof of this lies in the contents of the *Naval Dictionary*, a large number of which are derived from Portuguese. Indeed Laskari was probably the conduit for the introduction of many of the most widely used Portuguese-derived words in India.



[\(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

Consider the word 'balti' for instance; derived from the Portuguese 'balde', it probably referred originally to ship's buckets: today, no Indian household is complete without a set of tin or plastic baltis, just as no English town is without its supply of 'balti chicken', which was probably also a Laskari invention.

Similarly the word 'kamra', which is now used to signify 'room' in many Indian languages, came from the Portuguese 'camara', itself a derivative of the Latin 'camera' (room, vault). The word was almost certainly introduced through Laskari, in which it was used to mean 'ship's cabin'.

That Portuguese had a formative influence on Laskari is evident also from the frequency with which the dialect resorts to it in naming the basic anatomy of the ship.



["The cutwater of the 'Parma'", Alan Villiers \(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

The Laskari for cutwater, for example, is 'tâliyâmâr', from Portuguese 'talhamar'; and the word 'trikat', meaning 'fore', as in 'fore-mast', comes from the Portuguese 'traquete'.

Many Laskari words for ship's parts are also taken from Hindusthani and other Indian languages: thus a deck is a 'tootuk', a mast is a 'dol' and a sail is a 'serh' or 'pal'. Some of these terms have a rustic directness: the truck, or seal of the mast, becomes, for example, a 'laddu' [rounded sweetmeat]. These terms in turn enter into ever-more specific and complicated combinations with other linguistic influences in order to describe the many parts of the vessel. Thus, the Laskari term for fore-top-sail is constructed by joining 'trikat', 'gâvî' and 'serh', to form 'trikat-gâvî-serh' (or simply

‘trikat-gâvî’); similarly the fore-topgallant-sail is the ‘trikat sabar’; the fore-royal, the ‘trikat tabar’; the fore-topmast-staysail, the ‘trikat-gavi-sawai’, and the fore-topgallant-studdingsail, is the ‘trikat-sabar-dastur’. And so on.



USS Monongahela with a full set of studding sails set, 1862 (Wikimedia Commons)

English was another resource that Laskari drew upon in describing a ship: thus a hawser becomes a ‘hansil’ in Laskari; a jack-block becomes a ‘jugboolak’; a martingale becomes a ‘mâtanghai’, and the cable known as the messenger becomes a ‘masindar’. In this process of naming, languages often met and married, with curious and picturesque results. On many sailships, at the interesections of some of the masts and yards, there were small ledges that provided sailors with a temporary refuge from the harrassment and surveillance of their superiors: there they were wont to spend their leisure-time, smoking, gossiping and telling tales. In English these intersections were called ‘cross-trees’: Laskari took some of these syllables and turned them into ‘kursi’, which is a homonym for the commonly-used Arabic-derived Hindusthani word for ‘chair’: no doubt that was exactly the purpose served by this happy intersection of spar and mast.



INS ‘Sudarshini’, taking in the flying jib (<http://www.aseanindia.com/skippers-blog/>)

The words for the complex set of lateral masts that project forward from a ship’s bows – the jib, jib-boom etc. – also produced interesting intersections of language.

The spar that sprouted from the head of the ship became a ‘jîb’, which means ‘tongue’ in some Indian languages; from a crossing of Arabic, English and Hindusthani came the

word for flying-jib, 'fulâna-jîb', which might be translated as the 'anyone-tongue', and the outermost part of the jib-boom, where many a lascar lost his life, was the 'shaitân-jîb' – the Devil's-tongue.

7. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

The Laskari dialect was profoundly eclectic in its influences, as befits a language that was used by such a richly varied assortment of people. Consider the names for its ranks: 'serang', the senior most, is thought to be derived from Malay; the next, 'tindal' from Malayalam; the word for helmsman, 'sukkânî' (rendered in English as 'seacunny') comes from the Arabic for rudder (sukkân);



Seacunny on Duty': British India Steam Navigation Co Ltd (<http://www.merchantnavyofficers.com/peterR.html>)

the word for steward, 'ishtor', was an obvious adaptation of the English; 'kussab', a lower rank, may have come from Persian; and no one seems to know the derivation of the word for 'sweeper' – 'topas/topaz'. One of the most interesting of these words does not actually find a place in Roebuck's dictionary: it is the word 'arkati' meaning 'pilot', which is thought to be derived from the state of Arcot, near Madras, the Nawab of which once had in his employ all the pilots in the Bay of Bengal.^[1] The Laskari word for 'Mate' – and officers generally – is 'Malum', from the Arabic 'Mu'allim', or 'knowledgeable'. But how were the First and Second Mates distinguished from each other: were they Burra and Chhota, or Pehla and Doosra? Roebuck provides us with no clue.

Directional words are possibly the most frequently terms on a ship, and the most basic of these are 'for'ard' and 'aft'. The Laskari equivalents of these, according to Roebuck, were 'âgil' and 'pîchhil'. To anyone familiar with Hindi/Urdu these would appear to be mishearings of the words 'âgey' and 'pîchhey'. But no: Roebuck assures us that this is how the words were pronounced by Lascars and he was certainly in a position to know. Two other directional terms, starboard and larboard, became in Laskari, 'jamnâ burdu' and 'dâwâ burdu' or, simply 'jamna' and 'dawa'.

Anyone who has spent any time with sailors and boatmen in Asia, will know that they do not conceive of their vessels as inanimate objects: from Roebuck's dictionary it would seem lascars, similarly, figured their vessels as living things. The most striking example of this is the Laskari word for the kamra known as the fo'c'sle. The English word comes, as the spelling indicates, from 'fore-castle' and dates back to a time when there was indeed a castellated fortification at the head of every ship. But in time the word came to refer to the farthest forward of all the vessel's kamras, which consisted of a shallow, curved space between the bows. Being right above the taliyamar, this was the dampest, most uncomfortable part of the ship, and so naturally it was where the lowliest seamen were lodged. To be a fo'c'sleman, in English, meant much the same thing as shipping out 'before the mast' – it was to be a scrub, a Jack, a Tar, a Lascar. But the Laskari language, through an odd conceit, lends this crowded, cramped, foul-smelling kamra a small touch of poetry. The lascars' word for it was 'faná', or hood, as in the flared head of a cobra – and of course, if a ship were to be thought of as a creature of the sea, then this would be exactly the part of its anatomy to which the location of the faná would correspond.



16 Cadets on the yardarms of INS Sudarshini:

(<http://www.aseanindia.com/crews-blog/2012/09/17/super-16-who-climbed-the-mast-during-flag-off>)

Similarly, the word for the yard – the spar from which a sail hangs – is 'purwan'. Roebuck writes of this: "*Purwan*, I think is compounded of *Pur* a wing, or feather,

and *Wan*, a ship, which last word is much used by the lascars from Durat (properly Soorut) etc. so that *Purwan*, the yards of the ship, might also be translated the wings upon which the ship flies”.

[1] Cf. Albert Barrère, & Charles Leland: Dictionary of Slang , Jargon & Cant, Ballantyne Press, 1889.

8. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

If a ship was a living thing for lascars, was it always conceived of in the feminine, as was the case with European sailors? It is impossible to know of course, but I suspect not.



[‘A Dismasted ship riding out the gale’, Frederick Tudgay, 1861 \(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

Roebuck’s own gloss on this is very odd: he speculates that the term ‘lundbund’ comes from ‘nunga-moonunga’, meaning stark naked, which suggests that he was either overcome by an attack of pre-victorian prurience, or that he did not know what the word ‘lund’ meant (this is not impossible, since it is a common Indian trick to mislead foreigners about the meaning of such words. I must admit that I too am a sinner in this regard: once, in my salad days in Delhi, I was in a bazar with an English friend who was just beginning to learn Hindi. He spotted a brass *lota*, and having decided to buy it, wanted to know what it was called.

I confess, gentle reader, that I misled him ... I will never forget the look on the shopkeeper’s face when my friend inquired about the price of his —) *lota*

The word for ‘command’ in Laskari – which came to be used widely in English too – was ‘hookum’. Some of these provide interesting insights into the nature of the relations between lascars and their malums. For example, Roebuck translates the hookum ‘Heave and rally!’ as ‘Hubes mera bap!’ [lit: ‘heave my father] and goes on to add that “sometimes a little abuse is necessary; as for instance ‘*hubes sâlâ! buhan chod hubes!*(properly *buhin chod hubes*) or ‘*hubes huramzadu!*’.”^[1]

So far as the grammar of Laskari is concerned, Roebuck insists that no matter how promiscuous its vocabulary, the language is fundamentally (as every Indian likes to say about his tongue) very ‘chaste’, insisting that “there is little difference between the rules

of the high or Court Hindoostanee, and the dialect spoken by the Lascars.”^[ii] In other words, the syntax of Roebuck’s Lascari is, or so he claims, that of pure Urdu/Hindusthani. This assertion is difficult to accept: if it were true, how could Laskari serve as disparate a group of people as the lascars seem to have been? Is it conceivable that unlettered Malays, Arabs and Africans were fluent in Urdu? Even among South Asian lascars, most were Bengalis, Tamils, Goans, Kachhis etc, and most were uneducated: it defies credulity that they could speak ‘courtly Hindusthani’. What is more likely is that Roebuck’s Laskari was used only in relation to matters pertaining to the running of the vessel: it was really just a language of command. For the rest, the lascars probably used, amongst themselves, a series of contact languages and pidgins, made up of elements of Swahili, Malay, and Hindusthani. To communicate with officers and white passengers – and possibly often amongst themselves as well – they probably used variants of the Sino-Portuguese-English pidgin that came to be associated with the South China Coast. This marvellously expressive dialect once flourished in many corners of the Indian Ocean, but like Laskari, it did not outlast the age of sail.

[i] Of these common swear words Roebuck provides no translation, which can be forgiven considering that his is a technical glossary. The same cannot be said however of the **OED**, which, while providing definitions for scores of obscure and archaic Hindi/Urdu words, is unaccountably silent on these, which were probably the first learnt by most Englishmen on arriving in India. **Hobson-Jobson** does indeed list ‘banchoot’ & ‘beteechoot’, but only to offer a coy evasion: “terms of abuse which we should hesitate to print if their odious meaning were not obscure ‘to the general.’ If it were known to the Englishmen who sometimes use the words, we believe there are few who would not shrink from such brutality.”

[ii] Lieutenant Thomas Roebuck, **An English And Hindostanee Naval Dictionary**, first published in Calcutta in 1811, lxvi

9. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

What was the texture of daily life aboard a ship with a large complement of lascars? The library of Western nautical fiction, vast as it is, has little to say on this subject and the lascars themselves, inveterate story-tellers though they are said to have been, were resoundingly silent about their experiences, at least on paper.^[i] The passengers who traveled with them however, were anything but reticent: the length and tedium of long ocean voyages appears to have provided them, not just with the time and leisure, but also apparently the compulsion, to describe in detail everything they saw and experienced. Although many of their diaries and journals survive, few have been published – no doubt because most of them are just as tedious as the voyages they describe. But there are some exceptions. One such is the Journal of Cadet Robert Ramsay, the manuscript of which lies in the collections of the Maritime Museum at Greenwich in England.^[ii] Ramsay was a very young man when he travelled to Calcutta in 1825, on the ship *Lady Campbell*. His journal does not make for easy reading – his hand-writing, terrible to start with, worsened considerably in bad weather – but he was an uncommonly good diarist.

Ramsay's diary tell us that the *Lady Campbell* had seventy-four lascars on board and this company is presently revealed to consist of an assortment Africans, South Asians, Malays and Chinese. Although Ramsay does not say so, it seems likely that these men had embarked on the *Lady Campbell* not as part of her crew, but as paying passengers – this being necessary because of the legal restrictions on the employment of lascars. Yet it is clear from Ramsay's journal that, paying passengers or not, the lascars were still expected to work – and this might well have been the cause of bitter resentment on their part. In any event there was trouble from the start. This is how Ramsay describes their embarkation on January 3, 1825, at Gravesend:



GRAVESEND FROM THE THAMES, 1773

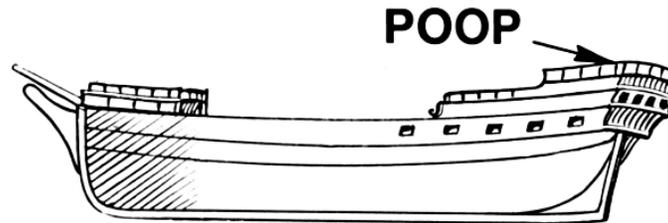
“The lascars came from two different vessels; and have therefore two Serangs; one company consists of 60, the other of about 12: – the Serang (or bo’sun) of the 60 having ordered one of his men to work, on the man’s refusing, struck him. The man resented it, and a contest ensued; the 1st Mate gave the Serang a rope’s end and desired him to beat the man which was done, the Serang beating 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, the other Lascars looking on and talking very fast in their tongue; – Mr. Murphy [the Mate] called the Serang, the Tindal (bo’sun’s mate) and some more Lascars to the quarter-deck and asked the Tindal why he did not assist the Serang as was his duty; – the Tindal replied it was not his business, that the Serang was in the wrong; and that he was not a countryman of the Serangs; (the Tindal was a gloomy, sulky, strong, determined looking Malay); Mr. Murphy told him if ever the Serang was insulted again and he (the Tindal) did not assist the Serang he should be flogged; and told the Serang to acquaint him (Mr. Murphy) if he did not; the Serang replied the Tindal was as bad as the man; they were ordered forward when in a little the Serang & Tindal were at very high words; Mr. Murphy came and ordered the Tindal on the Poop; – the latter refused; force was tried without effect; at last two sailors were ordered to take him; the blacks supported the Tindal and a scuffle ensued; but the sailors fists soon cleared the way and the Tindal was dragged to the Poop by the bo’sun, like a bundle of rags; the Armourer was sent for and the Tindal remained in irons on the Poop till dinner-time: – the Lascars were then all ordered below and threatened: – during the scuffle a black woman, Squinting Nancy, a passenger, having come to England as a Nurse, threw a large piece of iron in the direction of the Men! but falling short it hurt none: – what an Amazon!: – in the afternoon Mr. Murphy sent for her and told her if she ever did that again she would be put in irons like the Tindal; she denied having thrown the iron and set up a pretty chattering: – another black woman joined today; – when it is cold the English sailors work to warm themselves, but the Lascars cannot work for the cold, in a warm climate this will be reversed; a Lascar who has been in England only eight days has lost the use of his feet from the cold.”

[i] This silence is not reducible merely to a lack of familiarity with written English: it extends even to the written corpus of the languages of the Indian subcontinent. In Bengali for example, Ghulam Murshid was able to find few traces of lascar history that predate the 20th century. See Ghulam Murshid, *Kâlâpânir Hâthchâni: Bilete Bângalir Itihâs*, Abosar, Dhaka, 2008. I would like to thank Prof. Ashraf Hossain of Dhaka University for bringing this work to my notice.

[ii] Catalogue number: JOD 5, Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The text of this journal has not, to my knowledge, ever been published. This transcription is mine and I have retained the original spellings, punctuation etc. I would like to thank the Museum and its staff for their courtesy and co-operation.

10. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

Cadet Robert Ramsay's diary entry for January 4, 1825, describes further trouble on the Lady Campbell: "A lascar having struck the Serang was placed on the Poop; another Lascar with a bayonet in his hands, placed sentinel over the culprit"



On January 5: yet another lascar was in trouble, being "put on the Poop before Breakfast for stealing tobacco from one of his neighbours."

Once at sea, the relations between the lascars and the others degenerated still further, leading to some oddly farcical confrontations on matters ranging from the serving of grog to personal hygiene. At noon on the 20th of January: "the Lascars were ordered to bring their beds on deck; on their refusing, Mr. Murphy ordered three of the hammocks to be cut down for that purpose; this raised a great irritation among the Lascars and the African (to whom I gave my old black waistcoat on Wednesday) even threatened Mr Murphy: – The African was ordered on the Poop but he refused to go, and when it was attempted to take him the Lascars came to his assistance; – after a considerable scuffle the African, an old surly Arab and two other ring-leaders were put in irons, chiefly by the officers; the African and another were quite furious vowing deadly revenge against the Second Captain: – I had never seen the blacks turn out in such numbers before; there was a dense crowd on the lee side, from the Poop to the forecabin; pre-eminent above the rest was the Lascar cook, – as black as ever demon was pictured – entirely naked, except a dirty rag about his waist; – and with a long charcoal stick in both hands; – several others had pieces of wood; nothing but the bayonets would set them forward, and a sepoy had a jag from one; – some of the Cadets who were below came up in a great hurry when the musquets and bayonets were called for; Mr Moore brought up his regimental sword, scabbard and all; – Mr. Corfield a cutlass; – others bayonets and Mr Burroughs brought up and flourished his walking cane, which he said was quite sufficient for these fellows; – as for myself, I stood all the time on the Poop peeling an orange; – the butcher was rubbing the sick dogs all the time with the greatest sang-froid, merely saying when any of the Lascars came too near him "Get out of the road you d-d rascal"; – at sunset the prisoners were taken down and ironed below; a watch was put over them and the ladies, especially Mrs. R was much afraid; the Butler was

much offended at Mrs Clayhill's speaking to him about the offensive smell he had from the Garlic he eats, and was appeased with much difficulty..."

The next day, January 21st: "Shortly after breakfast all hands were mustered on the quarter-deck, the Europeans on one side and the Lascars on the other; the prisoners were brought up and everything being arranged the Captain began by stating his firm opinion that this disturbance among the Lascars was chiefly owing to dissatisfaction among the European sailors; that first the Bo'sun's and then the other Messes began to refuse their Grog, for what reason they know best, and yesterday when the Lascars resisted the officers of the ship, with sticks in their hands, not above three sailors came to the officers' assistance, but stood looking on, on the fore-castle; – that there was not a more easily managed people in the world than Lascars, and that even if he had given the seacunnies grog (a thing never done before), if that was any object; – that in future he should no more trouble himself whether the Lascars assisted in navigating the vessel or no; – during this harangue the Captain was repeatedly interrupted by a sailor with a broken nose called Nells, who said he was the first that refused grog & he then addressed the Serang on refusing to bring up his bedding, and his allowing his men to resist the officers taking a man aft who had even threatened the 1st Mate; that he would now make an example of these four men and if ever a Lascar lifted, or threatened to lift, a stick to any officer he should be shot whatever should be the consequence, and that he (the Serang) should not leave the vessel till his conduct was inquired into by justice; the Capn then repeated to the African the expressions he had used to Mr. M and descanted on the heinousness of his crime as intelligibly as possible; then turning to the Lascars he shewed them the sticks they had used, and threatened summary punishment to whoever should shew the least disaffection in future; the African was then tied up and his shoulder bared, rather against his will, and the gunner stood all ready with the Cat in his hands; in the mean time both Serangs begged for the criminals release, and the Capn at last yielded, or seemed to yield to their solicitations, on condition that if any Lascar behaved in such a manner again, both Serangs and Tindals should be flogged as well as the culprit; – when the African was to all appearances just about to be flogged, half of the Lascars went away to the fore-castle rather than see his punishment; – the almost naked cook made a prominent figure again amongst the motley group; his looks were as scowling as ever and altogher he was a perfect representation of the D_1 without wings; – the other Lascars seemed quite submissive when all were assembled & the Capn was just about to speak a pistol was heard to go off in Mr M's cabin; a servant had been loading it when it accidentally went off close to Mr. Strathfield; the ball hit the roof and retorted back on Mrs S.; on the report of the pistol the greatest anxiety was depicted on the face of the Lascars; plenty of arms had been taken out of the arms chest in case of necessity, but none were brought on deck; when the prisoners were released the Lascars went about their duties with the greatest alacrity... When the men were called out to set

the fore stun'sail yesterday afternoon, the Lascars refused to come up; Mr. Murphy went down and told them if they did not work we should never arrive at Calcutta; "Ah" says they, "When we get to Calcutta, we will take you to the Police."

§ Catalogue number: JOD 5, Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (see also my post of Dec 27). The text of this journal has not, to my knowledge, ever been published. This transcription is mine and I have retained the original spellings, punctuation etc. I would like to thank the Museum and its staff for their courtesy and co-operation.

11. The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail

Despite the mutual contempt and hostility, the tensions on the *Lady Campbell* remained within the bounds of what might have been described, in the English of the day, as a banyan-fight (a 'tongue-tempest' that 'never rises to blows or bloodshed')[i]. The vessel made steady progress and even when the weather turned foul, as it did on the 17th of April, the passengers were not denied the comforts of the table.

Cadet Robert Ramsay wrote in his journals: "Last night's rolling exceeded all we had met with off the Bay of Biscay; in our Cabins everything broke adrift and floated about in the water which came plentifully down the hatch-ways.

The thumping of our cots against the trunks or sides of the cabins prevented our having much sleep. Mr. C's bottles of lime-juice , lavender water & c were found lying on the floors without their necks.



'Storm at Sea' Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) [Wikimedia Commons]

The close smell below was excessive and all forenoon the foul air could be seen rising through the hatches as if it was steam from a boiler. The Cutter was nearly lost in the night from one of the davids [davits] or large pieces of wood which support it giving

way. – The day was as bad as the night. – endeavouring to keep in a sitting posture afforded excellent exercise. The milk-man fell and emptied the contents of his pitcher over himself, – a sudden lurch placed Mrs. H on her posterior close to the Lee Scuttle while coming to dinner, and last tho not least, while endeavouring to arrange my cabin I was pitched on one of my trunks and was glad to get off with a cut under one of my eyes. The scenes at the cuddy table baffle my powers of description: – “eat and drink while you can”, is the only way to get on; to have one hand at liberty for a whole minute was a rare occurrence. Legs of mutton, pork, hams, potatoes etc had no idea of remaining on their dishes: – the table-cloth was died with soup, butter, mustard, wine, beer & c. and the clothes of many shared the same fate: – the chairs were very fond of skating, making their owners measure their length upon the floor; Mr. C split Dr. H’s door with his head... It is extraordinary how the cook managed to dress the dinner in such stormy weather; there is the same variety of dishes, tarts etc as at other times; a little delay being the only difference. The present cook is a China-man who got into the ship among the Lascars; he soon became an assitant in the galley and was found to be a most expert hand, so much so as to excite the envy of his superior...”

Ramsay’s journal has many other mentions of lascars and sepoy: “A lascar having struck the Serang was placed on the Poop; another Lascar with a bayonet in his hands, placed sentinel over the culprit; having begged the Serang’s pardon and said he would behave so again, he was released.”

“A Lascar put on the Poop before Breakfast for stealing tobacco from one of his neighbours: –”

“... men taking in a craft load of rice for the Sepoys, there being 120 bags of about 130 lbs each, rice and red herring the chief food the sepoy, with a little mutton; amusing to see the beastly manner in which they gormandize the rice with their hands.”

“January 8: A strange scene to hear the Sepoys bawling all their might in half a dozen languages.”

On occasion the passengers amused themselves with games and other diversions. Ramsay remarks of one such: “after dinner there was a game of Leap-Frog, the Lascars seemed highly amused with it.” Later Ramsay describes a theatrical evening, performed, or so the passengers believed, in the privacy of an awning on the quarterdeck. Amongst the various skits that were staged there was one of a ‘drunken Blackey’. During the performance of this piece Ramsay happened to look up: he found that many lascars were watching the skit from up above, their faces framed by rents in the awning.

And so they lived, lascars and live cargo, each watching the other’s enactments through tiny cracks in their wooden world.

On Monday June 27 the Lady Campbell sighted the coast of Bengal:

“After dinner we saw Saugor Island a-head; the Pilot passed close to us; we passed several buoys in fathoms and anchored off Saugor at dusk. There were 6 large Indiamen lying in the new anchorage ; – Saugor is very low and overgrown with low trees and jungles, except a small point near the anchorage where one or two sheds were seen. A great deal of money was once laid out upon it but as fast as the jungle was cleared the sea carried off the soil.”

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[i] Ocington (1690), quoted in *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 65 (â€œSir G. Birdwood tells us that this is a phrase still current in Bombayâ€).