



## Who were the 'lascars' and why are they important?

During the Age of Sail, many European nations employed sailors from the Indian Ocean region. These men were known as 'lascars', a broad term often used to describe South Asian seafarers but also applied to Arab, Burmese, Malay, Javanese and even Filipino men. Lascars are an important part of both British history and global history.

Britain's colonization of South Asia and development of shipping networks created a huge demand for lascars. Lascars worked on many different types of sailing ship during the 1700s and 1800s.



The *Charlotte of Chittagong* and other Vessels at Anchor in the River Hoogli by Frans Balthazar Solvyns, 1792. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

They were particularly common aboard East Indiaman (large vessels operated by the East India Company that voyaged between Europe and Asia) and 'country ships' (smaller, privately-owned vessels trading between Asian ports). Lascars helped replace European sailors who deserted, caught debilitating diseases or died. They had their own ranks, such as *serang* (comparable to a boatswain) and *bhandari* (cook).

Some lascars stayed or settled in Britain, joining other Asian visitors and migrants. Much has been written about these men, whose traces can be found from London to Glasgow.

## What do we know about their lives at sea?

Investigating the experiences of lascars at sea is a very difficult task. Many lascars were illiterate and few left written material behind, such as letters or memoirs. Sources such as East India Company records, official logbooks, newspaper reports, court records and medical literature can help us begin to fill the gaps.

Private diaries kept by European sailors and passengers often provide a wealth of information. Those written by 'landlubbers' can be particularly useful since people with little or no seafaring experience were often keen to record and explain the many aspects of shipboard life that were new to them.

Such sources were, of course, written from a European perspective and often reveal deep prejudices against or profound misunderstandings of lascars.

Food is one subject upon which many diarists commented. We know via these and other sources



Three lascars behind the wheel of *The Viceroy of India* (1929). Such images were often posed.  
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

that lascars often ate onions, lentils, rice and salt fish whilst at sea. Like all sailors, they also found their own food. James Cordiner wrote in *A Voyage to India* (1820) that lascars aboard his ship '*gladly cut some slices from a large shark, to mix with their curry*'.

The different religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies associated with different groups of lascars were another subject that diarists liked to describe. Anthony Mactier, for example, claimed that Muslim lascars manning the *Surat Castle* in 1797 '*intoxicated themselves with Opium and wounded their breasts and other parts of the body with Swords dancing all the while to the Sound of the Tom Tom*' as part of a feast.

### **Were they involved in mutinies?**

Lascars employed aboard sailing ships sometimes took part in mutinies. The most serious of these typically involved a crew attempting to kill their captain, steal the cargo, divert the ship to a quiet stretch of coastline or port outside British control and then escape ashore.

Every mutiny was different. Lascars aboard the *Lark* (1783), for example, stole arrack and drank it below decks before throwing their captain overboard. Another mutiny, which took place aboard the *Berenice* (1852), was led by a man named Ali who, according to one account, dressed in the dead captain's hat and sat in his chair.

When the East India Company managed to capture mutineers, its servants interrogated them and many of the resultant depositions have survived. What lascars said was usually translated and summarized before being written down, and most deponents clearly changed their version of events to try to escape punishment. Nonetheless, these investigations offer a valuable insight into shipboard life amongst lascars, including details about their wives, which ports they had visited, how they referred to each other and even what they had planned to do with the proceeds of the mutiny.

Dr. Aaron Jaffer, Curator of World History & Cultures at Royal Museums Greenwich.