

# “INDIAN OCEAN NEWS”

## Indian Challenges To Australian Racialised Media

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Heather Goodall<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Two events involving Indians in Australia have grabbed news headlines at different times.<sup>2</sup> One was the 1945 campaign supporting Indonesian Independence in which Indian seamen – known then in Australia as “lascars” – played a high profile role for which they have seldom been acknowledged. The more recent has been the 2009 series of violent attacks on Indian students in Australia, which have aroused major news coverage and public debate in Australia and India. How might “news” media reflect better the potential of both these stories to tell transnational “Indian Ocean news” in which more than one narrative is heard? How, in fact, might they reflect the qualities of the Indian Ocean itself in fostering circulation and dialogue? To contribute to this wider question, this article explores two issues. Firstly, do cultural stereotypes persist over time and, if so, is it because news media re-create and re-circulate them in changing circumstances? Secondly, how does “access” to “making news” come about: whose voices are heard and how are “news” stories identified and told? In the light of what appears to be the simple perpetuation of old stereotypes into the 2009 stories, this paper examines both newspaper and documentary filmic representations of the 1945 campaign. It argues that the outcomes in each case involved selective, rather than wholesale, use of stereotypes. Moreover, each was the result of interaction and often contestation between the participants and the recorders of news – the “sources” and the “producers” – rather than complete dominance by Australian reporters or Western filmmakers over how the stories were told. The paper identifies the more effective of the 1945 strategies used by Indian actors and points to the ways such stories might be read as “Indian Ocean news” which makes visible not only each side of the story but the interactions themselves. This is no longer just a possible future scenario – digital media and internet communication mean that today’s stories are being read and watched

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Goodall is Professor of History at the University of Technology Sydney. She has published widely on Indigenous histories, environmental histories and histories of colonialism in the Indian Ocean. She was co-author of *Race, Ethnicity and the Media*, with Andrew Jakubowicz, Jeannie Martin, Tony Mitchell, Louise Randall and Kalinga Seneviratne, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> This paper has benefited greatly from conversations with Gopalan Balachandran, Devleena Ghosh, Michael Pearson, Tanja Dreher and the participants in the *Ocean of Stories* workshop in Perth in February 2008. It developed further with the insights of three anonymous reviewers, all of whom have added important dimensions to the approach it has taken. All responsibility for its continuing shortcomings, however, rests with the author.

almost simultaneously around the world by very different audiences. So working out what “Indian Ocean news” might be is now a matter of urgency.  
[media, Indians, seamen, stereotypes, news values]

## Introducing Indian Ocean News

How are Indian Ocean news stories created and told? “News” is shaped in the tension between the actors in “news-worthy” events and the producers of reports about those events. The reports are themselves shaped in turn by the cultural limitations, prejudices and stereotyping in media industries.<sup>3</sup> This operates even before the complex process of varied audiences’ reception is considered.<sup>4</sup> However, there are particular qualities that “Indian Ocean news” might have. It might go beyond any one country’s borders, in that it could allow the voices to be heard of the many different people who live round its shores and meet in its ports. The quality of the Ocean has been to ensure circulation of people, commodities and ideas, generating transformations as well as conflicts. In this sense, an “Indian Ocean story” should allow insights not only into each side of a conflictual story but also into the transactions and interchanges between actors, or “sources”, which have brought it about.

This article explores these questions by analysing news items created in Australia in 1945. They certainly show the imposition of “news values” in the production process, locking each item firmly within the limits of the Manichean polarization of national or colonial cultural perspectives. But they could have been Indian Ocean stories – and might still be so, because there remains within them evidence of the interactions between, and the voices of, a range of very different groups of actors. The content of these “news” items did not rest solely with the reporters, editors or filmmakers, despite the appearance that they controlled the production process. The participants in these news events, although not powerful “sources” in any conventional sense,<sup>5</sup> were still able

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Mastro (2009) “Effects of Racial and Ethnic Stereotyping”, in Jennings Bryant & Mary Beth Oliver (eds.) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, New York and London: Routledge, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.: 325-41.

<sup>4</sup> An account of the complex interactions involved in creating “news” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be found in Simon Cottle (2000) “Rethinking News Access”, *Journalism Studies* 1 (3): 427 - 448. The question immediately arises about whether “news” in the age of television and internet is created in different ways to the patterns in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> They were not the powerful “sources”, for example, see Jerry Palmer (2004) “Source Strategies and Media Audiences”, *Journal of Political Marketing* 3 (4): 57 - 77.

to intervene in the production process, leaving traces of their own collective narrative scattered through the dominant “news” story. Together, they can be read to open up a story beyond the polarized conflict which the “news” portrays, to show instead the multi-sided interactions which were occurring between the Indian Ocean participants.

There has been a striking absence of the full potential of Indian Ocean perspectives in the ways in which today’s news is told. In mid 2009, an example has been the response to a sequence of unprovoked and violent attacks on Indian students across south eastern Australia which was met initially by denials from Australian police that there had been any racial motivation. However, the police – and the Australian media and politicians – in claiming that the attacks were not racially motivated, had to draw on a handful of racially-specific stereotypes which seemed to come readily to mind. In one memorable example, Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walshe of the Victorian police explained that Indians were “quiet and passive” people who had failed to assert themselves, thereby making themselves “soft targets” for opportunistic attacks. Indians, it was argued, were characterized by these particular habits and behaviours, while the other “othered” groups, said to be the perpetrators of the attacks, could be identified by different but equally stereotypical behaviours such as aggression and criminality.<sup>6</sup>

It was only the tenacity and courage of young Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney – who kept publicly and collectively demanding their civil rights – which forced the police, the educational institutions and eventually the politicians to respond more appropriately. Since then there have been political interventions by no less than the Prime Minister of India, along with continuing anger expressed in the Indian media and a dramatic falling away of Indian inquiries about enrolment in Australia. All this prompted some belated but effective Australian investigative journalism which has finally begun to expose widespread exploitation in – and government failure to regulate – the lucrative vocational education sector in Australia.<sup>7</sup>

These attacks on Indian and other international students focus justifiable criticism on the Australian educational industry. But there is a wider question about why such

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<sup>6</sup> *The Age*, 29 May 2009. <http://www.theage.com.au/national/five-teens-charged-over-separate-attacks-on-indian-students-20090529-bptj.html>

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Carlisle (2009) “Holy Cash Cows”, *Four Corners*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 27 July 2009 <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2009/s2637255.htm>

stereotyping circulated so rapidly. Why was it so easy for the police to explain away the attacks and blame the Indian student victims? Why were such racially-specific excuses so comfortably accepted by progressive politicians and educational institutions? It could be written off as a persistent colonialist racism, but both the demographic and the popular cultural climate have changed substantially in Australia over the last 60 years since effective independence. If this is a survival of English colonialism – or indeed of more recent American imperial ideologies – the processes by which it persists and is recognized among what is now a highly diverse population still need explaining. Have these mythologies been recomposed over time and if so, have they been contested?

Some light may be shed on this by examining newspaper and film accounts of the 1945 campaign in Australia to support Indonesian independence from the Dutch, a campaign in which Indian, along with Indonesian, Vietnamese, Papuan and other seamen, were high profile actors. Two related incidents reported by three different Sydney papers show how the specificity of racial stereotyping was constructed and perpetuated through the selective use of headlines, photographs and text. The account from a leftwing filmmaker, produced at the same time as the newspaper reports, demonstrated similar representational techniques which generated similar racially-specific and discriminatory outcomes, despite the filmmaker's divergent political sympathies. Yet the newspaper items and the film also contain evidence of the Indian seafarers' challenges to such representations and suggest interactions beyond the simple schema laid out in the "news". Despite being unrecognized by contemporary audiences, and indeed by those of later decades, these Indian challenges are now visible for analysis, demonstrating continuities with the current Indian challenges to racialised stereotyping.

### **The 1945 Campaign**

The 1945 campaign arose as the war in the Pacific ended and Britain accepted that it would finally leave India, after decades of Indian demands. Yet Britain was also leading the South East Asian Command to manage the practicalities of Japanese surrender in South East Asia. This meant that with its SEAC allies, such as the USA and Australia, and with the Commonwealth troops still under their command, including the Indians, the British were trying to reestablish the Dutch colonial regime in the Netherlands East Indies. Indonesian nationalists repudiated this, unilaterally declaring national independence in August 1945, immediately on the Japanese surrender, and refused to

accept any return of the Dutch. The British insisted on guaranteeing the full restoration of Dutch colonial rule.

This confrontation led to open support in Australia for the Indonesian cause, particularly amongst those Australians who had opposed imperial control and influence in Australia. Many Indonesians had been exiled to Australia along with the Dutch when the Japanese had invaded in 1942. The Indonesian nationalists among them had formed close bonds with Australians in all walks of life.<sup>8</sup> The waterside unions supported the call by Indonesian activists in Australia to impose a ban on the loading and sailing of any ships, Dutch, British or otherwise, which were carrying supplies to assist the Dutch reentry. The Australian Labor Government was divided: the Prime Minister and many cabinet members supported the boycott of Dutch shipping, but the Minister for External Affairs, Dr. Herbert Evatt, feared the strength of the Communist-influenced waterside unions and argued that Australian troops should support the British in reimposing Dutch control. Although Evatt was later to alter his position, becoming well-known as a champion of Indonesian Independence in the new United Nations by 1948, his opposition to the boycott in 1945 meant there was confusion in Australia about the government position. Consequently, media coverage was fluid, reflecting a range of views which allowed many Australian positions to be arrayed.<sup>9</sup>

But the Australian unionists were not the only people who were enthusiastically supporting the Indonesian declaration. While Australian dockworkers could refuse to load Dutch shipping, the international vessels which would be carrying reinforcements to the Netherlands East Indies were not crewed by Australians. Most of the crews of the British ships, and a significant proportion of those on the Dutch ships, were Indians. Those crewmen hailed from a small number of areas on the subcontinent, some from Goa and the Konkan coast and another smaller group from the northwestern provinces, but by far the largest section of the Indian seamen in Australia in 1945 were from the north-eastern areas of Bengal. Most of them were Muslim. Many were also members of the militant Indian seafarers' unions. So all were interested as Indians in the independence campaigns of the Indonesians and most also felt solidarity with the

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Lingard (2008) *Refugees and Rebels: Indonesian Exiles in Wartime Australia*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> Rupert Lockwood (1982) *Black Armada: Australia and the struggle for Indonesian independence 1942-49*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

Indonesians as “brother Muslims”. As a result, the Indians played a major role in initiating and sustaining the boycott in Australian waters, a role which has been as yet little recognized.<sup>10</sup>

### The Stereotypes to Hand

We learn a great deal both about why the Indians have not been remembered in this campaign and about how they continue to be depicted if we consider the media representations of this boycott against Dutch shipping. There had been a number of racialised stereotypes – that is, clusters of simplified assumptions about behaviour, character, religion and physical appearances – which could be seen circulating in Australia at different periods of conflict in its colonial history. These had each arisen in specific conditions, in which the views of the British Colonial Office had often been dominant, although the divisions within and between local elites and working class groups had given each a peculiarly local inflection.<sup>11</sup> There were, in fact, many Indians in Australia, despite the illusion created by the White Australia Policy that Indian resident populations had never arisen. Palfreeman counted 7,637 Indians resident in Australia in 1901, though Yarwood counted only 4,681 and saw this declining to 3,150 by 1921.<sup>12</sup> Margaret Allen has made the important point that each one of these people had lives in both Australia and in India where they were in continuing contact with families and communities, often fulfilling very different social roles to those they were called on to fill in Australia.<sup>13</sup> Their views on any of the conflicts which created the Australian stereotypes have seldom been recorded, but will be essential to a broader understanding of these media processes in the transnational and intercolonial interactions to which they contributed.

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<sup>10</sup> Heather Goodall (2008) “Port Politics, Race and Change: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945 -1947”, *Labour History* 94: 43-68; Heather Goodall (2009) “Shared Hopes, New Worlds: Indians, Australians, and Indonesians in the Boycott of Dutch Shipping, 1945–1949”, in Shanti Moorthy & Ashraf Jamal (eds.) *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, London: Routledge: 158-96.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Doust (2004) “Race and Empire: Setting up Boundaries in Colonial Eastern Australia”, *Australian Historical Studies* 123:152-66.

<sup>12</sup> A. Palfreeman (1967) *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press; A.T. Yarwood (1967) *Asian Migration to Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, both cited in Margaret Allen (2008) “A fine type of ‘Hindoo’ meets ‘the Australian type’: British Indians in Australia and diverse masculinities”, in Desley Deacon, Penny Russell & Angela Woollacott (eds.) *Transnational ties: Australian lives in the world*, Canberra: ANU ePress: 41-56.

<sup>13</sup> Allen (2008: 44-46).

There were at least four separate sources in which stereotypes of South Asians had been mobilized in Australia before 1945. Each had been racialised, in the sense of being biologically determinist, whether the conflict was in the 1840s over indentured labourers from Bihar and Bengal, or in the 1890s over cameleers from the North Western Frontier Provinces. This was because the question of how persistent the submissive characteristics of any form of bonded labourers were, across generations after emancipation, was understood by elites in England to be just as relevant for the predominantly Irish convicts in Australia as it was for African slaves or the Indian indentured workers. Yet each stereotype also had a strongly gendered dimension, often so divergent that they could be contradictory. The 1840s stereotype of Indians, for example, generated in the debates over indentured and transported labour, characterized “coolies” as “hindoos” who were physically weak, submissive and therefore “effeminate”. At the same time, however, they were assumed to be unreliable and “cunning” and in this sense still posed a sexual danger to English and settler women. The question of gender became complicated in the second stereotype which emerged in relation to a very different group arriving through the middle years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Often younger sons from families in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Punjab and elsewhere, they came to Australia to enhance their families’ incomes by trading and many became traveling merchants, designated among other Australians as “hawkers” and often castigated in what were once more both racialised and gendered terms as “pests” and as sexual threats to isolated “white” pastoral women.<sup>14</sup> Yet these were from the same groups whom the British sought out in India for military recruitment and valorized as “manly” and “martial races”, including followers of the Sikh religion as well as Pathans, who were Muslims. The confusions which such conflicting stereotypes generated can be traced in some individual biographies, although in general the characterizations of “hawkers” in Australia was kept well separate from any admiration of “martial” Indians in the British army.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Allen (2008: 45) citing the *Richmond River Times* in northern NSW in 1896. The term “white” is a political term which appears to relate to skin colour, and so is considered a “racial” term. In Australia it initially indicated Anglo ancestry among politically dominant British settler groups, although it was later expanded to include the Irish and then the many European and Caucasian immigrants who were recruited to bolster the politically dominant classes. The rest of this article will not use italics for this term, despite its multifaceted symbolic and political rather than descriptive nature.

<sup>15</sup> Anirudh Deshpande (1989) “Sailors and the Crowd: Popular Protest in Karachi, 1946”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 26(1): 1-28.

The stereotypes became more divergent still in relation to yet another group of Indians for whom a cluster of characteristics were invented and circulated as a stereotype. These were the cameleers, who were invited to come to Australia early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from areas like the North West Frontier Province or Afghanistan to enable transport in the frightening deserts of the centre of the continent. Only camels could traverse these zones of shifting sand and stoney deserts to link the southern coastal ports with the more northerly pastoral regions and the north coast ports. For much of the century there was no direct economic competition between other Australians and the many north-western province Indians – all called Afghans – who came to manage and breed the camels and organize the trade in goods they carried. They were known to be predominantly Muslims but their cultural and religious differences were not only tolerated but approved because of their essential roles.<sup>16</sup> However in the 1890s, as the gold rushes in desert Western Australia confronted world economic depression, ‘white’ goldminers and aspiring transporters came into conflict with the well-established “Afghan” cameleers, whose skills in the management of large-scale desert transport had been refined for decades in Australian conditions. These bitter economic conflicts were displayed in abusive articles about the Afghan community in the Western Australian newspapers. Opportunistic use was made of the cameleers’ widespread religious adherence to denigrate them as “fanatical” and “frenzied” “Mussalmen”. This stereotype gained even wider circulation in the First World War, when the British government used Australian – and Indian – troops to invade Turkey, and the gruelling Gallipoli campaign in 1915 generated vicious anti-Turkish propaganda in Australia, in which all “Turks”, including those Afghans and men from the North West Frontier Province in Australia, were depicted as blood-thirsty Mussalman fanatics.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, there was another directly relevant source for the stereotypes which might have been available to the Australian media in 1945. This was the stereotype about Indians in

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<sup>16</sup> Christine Stevens (1989) *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press; Pamela Rajdowski (1987) *In the Tracks of the Camelmen*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Coolgardie Miner*, almost any issue, but 15 April 1897 is representative in its inclusion of phrases like: “rising fanatics”, and “awful horrors that follow even the temporary triumphs of the black man over the white, or the Moslem over the Christian”, cited in Michael Cigler (1986) *The Afghans in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Ethnic Heritage Series: 82–83. Australian attitudes towards violent attacks on and parliamentary debates about Afghans and Indians (both “Mussalman” and “Hindoo”) in Western Australia, South Australia, and New South Wales from the 1890s are extensively documented in Rajdowski (1987: 149-65).

the seafaring industry. The term “lascar” had originally been a Persian word, but in Australia had been narrowed to become a very specific synonym for “Indian”. The seafaring industry was one in which large numbers of Indian crewmen continued to come to Australian shores. It was also one in which selective and specific racial stereotyping had become critically important as the steamship trade expanded from the 1850s and jobs on steamers diversified and became racially segmented. Janet Ewald has traced the processes by which not only did jobs become differentiated but restrictive legislation in Britain and the colonies also proliferated. These “Asian Articles” were founded on the imagined differences between various racially-defined crewmen, ascribing greater strength for the intolerable engine rooms to African “seedies” (derived from the common North African surname Sayed) while “lascars” or Indians were said to be more suited to “catering” or “deckhand” duties and to ships sailing into warmer rather than colder climates. The influence of early gendered stereotypes of “hindoo” men as physically weak, docile, submissive and effeminate can be seen strongly in these characterizations of “lascars”, despite the fact that many of them, in Australia as elsewhere, were Muslims. As Ewald and others have shown, such stereotypes controlled the movement of Indians and others into and out of the European and colonial ports, limited their geographic employment and locked them into low wages and poor conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Ravi Ahuja has demonstrated conclusively how stereotypes of behaviour, particularly that about “lascars” being docile and submissive employees, were continually reinforced despite repeated challenges by Indian seafarers, because the British government colluded with the British-owned shipping companies. These stereotypes of docility were therefore confirmed in the eyes of observers, like the labour unions in Britain and the colonies, who were only interested in the Indian crews’ apparent submission to low wages and conditions which undercut those which the “White” unions were seeking to guarantee for their own members.<sup>19</sup> The “White” unions of

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<sup>18</sup> Ewald, Janet (2000) “Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750 – 1914”, *American Historical Review* 105(1): 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ravi Ahuja (2006) “Mobility and Containment: the voyages of Indian Seamen, c. 1900-1960”, *International Review of Social History* 51 Supplement: 111-41; Ravi Ahuja (2009) “Networks of subordination - networks of the subordinated: the ordered spaces of South Asian maritime labour in the age of imperialism, c.1890-1947”, in Ashwini Tambe & Harald Fisher-Tine (eds.) *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia*, London and New York: Routledge: 13-48.

Britain and Australia blamed the Indian “lascars” for their own oppression, rather than investigating the realities or supporting their Indian fellow workers.

Nevertheless, Indian seafarers had demonstrated time and again their determination to challenge the stranglehold the European shipping companies had on their conditions of employment. Frank Broeze has shown how extensively the Indian seamen had unionized and that their continued challenges to British and European shipping companies made them one of the most effectively unionized groups of workers across India.<sup>20</sup> Balachandran has taken Broeze’s work further, acknowledging the high degree of union organization but pointing out that union-led campaigns carried little weight once seamen were on board ship or in foreign ports. However, Balachandran has investigated the informal strategies which Indian crews undertook, often successfully, to undermine the control of both the shipping companies and the British and colonial governments. The Indian seafarers’ persistence in collective organization and their use of strategic demands in the ports of Britain and the U.S A. – and indeed in Australian ports as well – had demonstrated their continuing determination to exercise some control over their conditions, even if the unions of white crewmen in those countries were unsympathetic.<sup>21</sup>

There are two important implications of the research into Indian seamen’s histories. Firstly, extensive racial stereotyping was widespread in the industry, penetrating the popular cultures of the colonies as well as the metropole, and was reinforced each time there was an unsuccessful campaign by the Indian seamen, even though their defeat was caused by the collusion of the colonial government and companies. Secondly, however, the Indian seamen had repeatedly organized collective acts of resistance, sometimes in union-led struggles but often in more subtle and localized informal strategies implemented by the crewmen of particular ships in foreign ports. Such strategic actions, by their very nature, were seldom recognized to be resistance nor to be on a similar pattern to such strategies enacted in other ports at other times.

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Broeze (1981) “The Muscles of Empire – Indian Seamen and the Raj 1919 – 1939”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1: 43-67.

<sup>21</sup> Gopalan Balachandran (2003) “Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen 1890 – 1945” in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass & Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.) *Society and Circulation: Mobile Peoples and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, New Delhi: Permanent Black: 89-130; Gopalan Balachandran (2008) “Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts: Indian Seamen Abroad, 1885-1945”, *Transforming Cultures eJournal: Cultural Currents of the Indian Ocean* 3 (2): 45-75.

## How did 1945 Australian Media see these Events?

An examination of media created in Sydney in 1945 shows how representations of Indians were mobilized and used but also how the South Asians involved tried to challenge – in visual as well as verbal terms – the media representations by which they were being attacked and marginalised.

By November 1945, the Indian crewmen who had walked off the ships in Sydney were living alongside the activist Indonesians in a number of strike camps. The main one for the Indians was a block of flats in north Sydney, The Lido, originally appropriated by the Australian military to house evacuated Dutch personnel but now taken over by those strikers who had left the Dutch KPM line. The Indian crewmen, in concert with Indians who had been in Australia for longer between ships and had built up personal and political friendships among Australians on the Left, had formed themselves into the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia (ISUiA).<sup>22</sup> The striking Indians were being supported by donations from sympathetic Australian unions and the public, but the Indians were arguing that KPM was responsible for their wages and upkeep as it had changed the conditions under which the men had been hired in the first place. This accusation is an example of a tactic Balachandran has described as common among Indian crews in British ports, involving a strategic use of the restrictions of the Asian Articles to achieve their own goals. It had allowed the Indians in Britain to gain legal recognition of their claims against the shipping companies.<sup>23</sup> In the Australian case, the Indians wanted the wages they had lost during the boycott to be paid to them, as well as to have the cost of their upkeep and of their repatriation to their homeland covered by the company.

## Sydney Newspapers

The first example is from the newspaper coverage of two related protests. On 12 December 1945, 125 Indian seamen occupied the KPM offices in George Street, Sydney, and on 18 December, over 200 protesters, most of them Indians with a small number of Indonesians, carried out another occupation. Of the afternoon papers, the

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<sup>22</sup> The ISUiA kept meticulous records of minutes, memberships, draft speeches and budgets, as well as press clippings, all of which are now held in the Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University Archives, series E177, 1945-1949.

<sup>23</sup> Balachandran (2008: 60-3).

*Daily Mirror* reported both incidents while the *Sun* only reported the 18 December occupation. Both occupations were reported the following morning in the “quality” broadsheet, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH). The *Mirror* was then an independent newspaper, founded in 1941 and owned by Ezra Norton until sold to Fairfax and then Murdoch in 1958. While routinely covering crime and sport in a sensational style, in 1945, when still owned by Norton, it was thought, like its sister paper the Melbourne *Truth*, to have a generally working-class orientation.

## INDONESIAN SEAMEN IN V Indonesians Not Pleased *Fists Fly, Glass S*



SCENES DURING the demonstration by more than 200 Indonesian and Lascar seamen at the head office of the K.P.M. Line in George Street today. Above: The sailors gather outside the company's office. Right: A police sergeant stands on guard to prevent any more demonstrators from entering the building after some had already forced their way in.

## AIR COMPANY'S BIG EXPANSION PLANS

Wide expansion plans for Australian National Airways were announced in Melbourne today by the director (Captain Ivan Holyman).

WHEN implemented, the plans will bring half the country residents of Australia within two hours flying distance of their nearest capital city. Capt. Holyman said that 30 per cent. of the remainder of country people would be brought within four hours' distance of their capital city and the balance within eight hours. Although it had been reported

## Govt. Defers Pensions Bill

The Parliamentary Pensions Bill will not be proceeded with



Section, *Daily Mirror* on second occupation, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1945.

Held ISUiA archives, E177, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.

The *Sydney Sun* and the *SMH* were wholly owned by the Fairfax family, part of Sydney's conservative elite. Tracing the sequence of the news stories from one paper to another allows us to see a shift in the reporting process from the interpretations available in the afternoon tabloids, at least one of which was independent of establishment media owners, through to the following day's "quality" press.<sup>24</sup>

One of the questions for today's historians is how the Indian role in the Black Ban on Dutch shipping could have been made to disappear so completely as it has done. The wider political context of the boycott offers some answers to this question, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> but the patterns in media representations of the events show actual steps in the process. Part of the answer to the mystery of the disappearing Indians lies in the changing use of terminology. Today, in 2009, the term "lascars" is never heard, and when it is encountered in old texts, its meaning is not self evident. In the 1940s, on the other hand, the use of the term "lascars" for seafarers was widespread. In many parts of the world, the word could have been used for both Indonesian and Indian seamen. However, its particular usage in Australia is evident in the coverage in the *Sun* of 18 December, in phrases like "Lascars and Indonesians" where both indicate a nationality. So initially the coverage of these two incidents did not ignore the Indians, but referred to them in language which is no longer current and which even then was confusing. Only the *Mirror* article of 12 December carried a headline which used the term "Indians" and then only in relation to the first incident. The *SMH* of 13 December simply talked about "wild scenes" in its headlines, although in the body of the article it referred to "British Indians". Indeed the text makes clear that all the participants in the 12 December demonstration were Indian and that a substantial proportion of those on 18 December were Indian also. The texts in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* on 18 December are confused and use only the term "lascars".

Far more evident than confusing terminology, however, is that all three papers simplified the racial content of the story – perhaps to cater for the limited international knowledge of readers or to pare down the story to what the editors regarded as the

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<sup>24</sup> The *Daily Mirror*, 12 Dec 1945 and 18 Dec 1945 p2; The *Sydney Sun*, 18 Dec 1945 p3; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 Dec 1945 and 19 Dec 1945, p4. These articles were clipped and collected in the archives of the ISUiA, Noel Butlin Archives, E/177. The following discussion is based on close reading of these clippings.

<sup>25</sup> Goodall (2008).

essentials. Each of the three papers referred only to only one racial group in their headlines. On 12 December, there was only one group participating, the Indians, and at least in the *Mirror*, for the only time, they were referred to as Indians. However, on 18 December, although the majority of participants were Indians, there were some Indonesians present, which threw the three newspapers into confusion. For the *Sun*, the headline became “Lascars storm Dutch offices” which, as discussed above, was ambiguous. But for both the *Mirror* of 18 December and the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 19 December, the headlines and photo captions suggested it was all about “Indonesians”: In the *SMH* “Indonesian Seamen in Wild City Scene: Fists Fly, Glass smashed in office” and “Indonesians Storm KPM Office” while the *Mirror* simply reported “Indonesians Not Pleased”.

This simplification may have arisen because the campaign was about support for Indonesian independence, and because of the familiarity of the Australian public with Indonesians after their wartime exile in Australia. But if it was to sharpen the focus of the story, reducing it to the simple, bi-polar conflicts which the search for “news values” tends to generate, why was it the minority who were identified rather than the major and continuing participants? This choice certainly suggested to readers that it was the Indonesians rather than the Indians who were taking assertive direct action. Indians were implied, if present, to be followers rather than to be initiating and leading the demonstration. This parallels the racially differentiated stereotyping which had been most evident in the maritime industry’s Asian Articles, in which different stereotypes were applied to different groups of seamen, thereby enabling discrimination in wages and conditions. Indonesians were assertive demonstrators, the articles suggested, whereas Indians were submissive so would not be found leading such direct actions.

The headline simplifications of the racial composition of the demonstration – and the marginalization of the Indian role – are in striking contrast to the photographs in the *Mirror* of 18 December and the *SMH* of 19 December, which clearly show the predominant presence of Indian seamen, many in neat uniforms, in contrast to the *SMH* description of them, beneath the photograph, as “wearing all types of clothes and head covering”. The “wild melee” appears in the photographs to have been, at least on the footpath outside, a series of orderly, if very heated, verbal arguments between Indians (mostly dressed in suits and in pressed merchant navy uniforms) and Sydney police officers.



**Sydney Morning Herald photo, 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1945  
taken outside KPM offices the day before. State Library of NSW**

Common to all three papers' coverage of both demonstrations was language suggesting the violence of the protesters and threats to the staff of the KPM offices. The Dutch had been in Australia as exiles, just like the Indonesians, since 1942, and their general demeanour and attitude towards the colonized Indonesians, both in Australia and in the Netherlands East Indies, had not endeared them to Australians generally. Nevertheless, they were positioned in this story as the "unmarked category" of "staff" and as fellow Europeans. Associating protest with violence was a standard strategy of the Sydney press (see, for example, *Sun* of 7 November 1945: 1, "Dutch and Reds in wharf riot") and it is not surprising that a protest occupation of a city office would be reported as violent. Reporting the 12 December occupation, the afternoon tabloid, the *Mirror*, headlined "100 Indians besiege Pay Office" and the "quality" *SMH* led with "Wild Scenes at Shipping Company".

However, the afternoon paper described the demonstrators showing initial calm and a high level of organization. The *SMH* on the following morning took a very different approach. It made no mention of any initial order on the part of the demonstrators.

Instead, it opened its first paragraph with a graphic description which presented the readers with an image of the alien and the threatening:

Gesticulating wildly and shouting threats in their native tongue, 125 British Indian seamen stormed the office of KPM....to demand portion of their pay....An ugly scene threatened.

The Indians had “shouted”, “yelled” and “created a bedlam”, leading to alarm by the “girl clerks and typists”, and “to fears that the office might be wrecked by some of the Indians, who were in a state of hysteria”. Yet – in contradiction to all the rest of its text, the morning paper finished by reporting that the Indians had left in an orderly manner after the pay negotiations with KPM.

The discrepancy between the afternoon paper and the report the following morning was marked. Although both reports depicted the Indians as threatening, the *Mirror* was quite clear about their orderly demeanor and rational goals. The *SMH*, on the other hand, had introduced quite disparate elements, and in particular the graphic depiction of irrational, alien and threatening behaviour, marked by foreignness and impending violence.

This shift was even more evident in the coverage of the second occupation, on 18 December, which was written up by the two afternoon dailies, the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, and the following morning by the *SMH*, with photographs in both the *Mirror* and the *SMH*. In today’s media context, the tabloid afternoon papers might be expected to write up the events more sensationally than the “quality” morning press. Their afternoon headlines certainly tell a story of violent threat: “Lascars storm” the offices, the *Sun* declares, rather than describing them as walking in the door calmly as the text beneath says they did. The *Mirror* points to the “wild scenes” of “fists flying” and “glass smashing”. From a reading of all three papers, it seems that the “glass smashing” occurred because one male Dutch clerk fell back onto a glass panel which cracked, yet much of the text in each account supports the overall image of confrontational and threatening violence. This could suggest the martial, confrontational “Mussalman” stereotypes of Indians and others which would at least have been an accurate reflection of actual religious affiliation, as we know from the archives that many of the Indians were in fact Muslims, as were the Indonesians.

But far more striking than the impression of violence created by the reporting were the accusations of irrationality and frenzy which accompanied the accounts of this violence in each of the three papers. The two afternoon papers show common elements: the seamen are described as entering in an orderly manner, and accepting cups of tea made for them by staff. Soon, however, according to the *Sun*, the protesters “go mad”, to the rising distress of the “terrified”, “screaming” and “hysterical” typists and Dutch staff. The *Sun* continued that, while initially quiet, the protesters became a “mob” who began “tramping” through offices, “yelling”, “hurling” Dutch staff against glass panels, “charging” up stairs and breaking the teacups. The *Mirror* gave an even more lurid account of violence in what it called a “wild melee”, but in this version the typists, although still being described as “hysterical”, certainly stood up for themselves. One of these young women picked up a hapless seaman and hurled him over the heads of the other demonstrators as they came up the stairs.

Once again, however, it was the morning *SMH* which shifted the representations most strikingly. Just as it had done in the reporting on 13 December, the *SMH* on 19 December failed to mention any semblance of rationality or order on the part of the demonstrators. Instead, it introduced and emphasized visual and emotive descriptions which had not been present at all in the afternoon press accounts. It did so in ways which could only emphasise the alien and “foreign” nature of the protesters as well as to heighten fear of them. Language was used once again as a marker of the alien and the ominously unknown. Of even more direct relevance to the existing stereotypes to which the *SMH* writers must have turned, this representation emphasized the irrationality of the protesters, who were not only effeminately “hysterical” – in an interesting process of shifting the “hysterical” descriptor from the female office staff to the male Asian protesters – but threateningly irrational, in a parallel with the aggressive, fanatical “Mussalman” stereotype.

...As they streamed into the building, they yelled and gesticulated as if they intended to wreck the office.....Jabbering in their native tongue and throwing their arms about, the men invaded every part of the office.... Girl clerks screamed and attempted to escape as wooden partitions were smashed down.... The scene was so ugly... It resolved itself into a babel of foreign tongues, during which the coloured men were in a state of hysteria...The male members of the office got the terrified girl clerks out of the building. Some had to be lifted over the coloured men as they squatted and lolled about the floors and office fittings....

The *Mirror* pointed out that the protest on 18 December had focused on the seamen's demand that their food be paid for by KPM, whereas the 12 December protest focused on wage restitution. A box of fruit had "mysteriously arrived at the scene" in what seemed to form part of the symbolic demand food. The following day, the *SMH* had turned even this into a smear, using the food to suggest unhygienic and malevolent disorder as well as frenzied violence:

After they had smashed glass panels and wooden partitions and littered the floors with fruit peelings, scraps of food and other debris, police induced them to leave.

Yet, as largely negative as these reports were, they carried fragmented evidence of the aims and tactics of the protesters. Most obviously the afternoon press, and particularly the *Mirror*, showed that at least some of the protesters' strategies were recognized by the reporters, although others seem to have been misunderstood – surviving only as the reporting of what seem like disconnected and incidental details. And still others survive only in the photographs and are completely ignored – or even contradicted – in the text.

Firstly, the strategies which were recognized were the orderly planning and focused goals of each protest, being wages restitution by KPM on 12 December and KPM responsibility for the seamen's food on 18 December. As the *Mirror* reported in both cases, the protesters arrived in an orderly manner, stopped business non-violently in the initial stages of the protest and negotiated throughout for their demands to be met. They expressed their demands clearly to KPM and to the reporters, pointing out in the second demonstration that other unions had donated funds to support the strikers and the seamen now felt that KPM had to take up its responsibilities. The *Mirror* also recognized the collective and political nature of the seamen's organizations and demands – it noted, in describing the men's appearance, that among other things, "Some of the men wore the Red Russian star and others the badge of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia". Few of these details, noted by the afternoon papers, and demonstrating rational strategies and negotiation, were reproduced in the following mornings' *SMH*, which instead in each case concentrated on irrational violence, disorder and threat. Only one detail did survive in the morning paper, this and was used to increase the sense of threat by raising the spectre of communism.

Though some of the demonstrators wearing Communist emblems persisted in their determination to remain, the (“Javanese”) interpreter (of the Police Inspector’s statement) advised them to leave the building quietly ....<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, among the strategies that were not recognized by reporters but were nevertheless revealed in the article descriptions, were those of non-violent non-cooperation. The protesters, for example, were said to enter and rapidly fill all the spaces on either sides of the counter, making continued business impossible. Furthermore in each demonstration, they then sat down on the floors and on the counters themselves. They refused to move but “made no hostile demonstration” when ordered to do so, firstly by KPM staff and then later by NSW Police officers. Such strategies of non-violent non-cooperation had been a particularly highly developed tactic in Gandhian campaigns in India from 1919, and were certainly ones of which these Indian demonstrators would have been very aware. The reporters, on the other hand, would have had far less exposure to a tactic which had not yet gained widespread usage within Australia or other parts of the Western world, as it was to do in later decades.

Finally, some of the strategies used by the demonstrators were not noted in the text, but are visible in the photographs. These firstly show the predominance of Indian participants, but most notably they show the careful use of dress to identify the demonstrators. They all appear in jackets or in uniform, and so were presenting not only as neat and respectable, but as members either of the merchant navy or, in this immediate aftermath of warfare, of formal navy corps. Their dress, and this explicit identification with formal and official – and perhaps even military – employment, was not only ignored in the press content but was in fact contradicted in the morning “quality” broadsheet of 19 December, when the *SMH* derisively described the men as “wearing all types of clothes and head covering”. In the complex politics of dress in British India, varied head coverings, ranging from different styles of turban to cloth caps and martial helmets, had been used to discriminate between and against all groups of Indians, distinguishing them from the specific head coverings retained as the sole

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<sup>26</sup> Why was the interpreter said to be “Javanese”? There is no other suggestion anywhere in the text that the “interpreter” was speaking any Indonesian language. Given the numerical dominance of Indians in this second occupation, and the well-documented presence at such events of Indian interpreters like Dasrath Singh, who routinely translated from English into the seamen’s various languages, it seems that this labelling as “Javanese” is just the *SMH* journalist adding “colour” in a continuation of the misleading assumption that it was an “Indonesian” demonstration.

preserve of the ruling British.<sup>27</sup> Both the Indian demonstrators' careful use of clothes and the *SMH's* scathing denigration on the basis of a fictive description of clothing all add up to an indication of the political strategies on all sides.

So the Indians, with their Indonesian and Australian allies, had created a piece of performative politics in these two demonstrations, showing their rational strategies, negotiating through most of the events to achieve their aims, and seeking to show, by their behaviour, words and dress, that they were responsible and organized workers with just demands. Yet these complex intentions had been only partially recognized by the Australian media. And of the elements recognized, the Australian papers had selectively used them or actively distorted some and invented others – to varying degrees depending on media ownership and editorial decisions – to leave a consistent and powerful impression on readers. This was, firstly, that the demonstrations were largely the work of Indonesians who were the initiating and organising force behind them. The Indian presence virtually disappeared from the headlines and was minimal in the text in all three papers. Secondly, that the demonstrators were characterized as alien, different and distasteful to the papers' assumed readership, distancing them from these protesters who may, in the end, have been communists. Finally, the strongest narrative created was of the irrationality, frenzy and violence threatened and enacted by these “Indonesian” demonstrators.

### **Interrogating “Indonesia Calling”**

The second example of media produced in this period is *Indonesia Calling*, a documentary film, released in mid 1946 but based on reconstructions filmed largely in late 1945, exactly when the newspaper reports just discussed were being created.<sup>28</sup> The film was directed by the Dutch communist filmmaker, Joris Ivens, and funded by the Australian Waterside Workers' film unit.<sup>29</sup> All the workers who were maintaining the boycott must have been expecting a much fairer representation in this film than had

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<sup>27</sup> Julie Codell (2006) “Excursive Discursive in Gandhi's Autobiography: Undressing and Redressing the Transnational Self”, in D. Amigoni (ed.) *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate: 166-95; Bernard S. Cohn (1996) “Cloth, clothes and colonialism”, Chapter 5 in his *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996: 106-162.

<sup>28</sup> Courtesy Heritage Films, copy held in the Australian Film, Television and Sound Archives, Canberra.

<sup>29</sup> Drew Cottle & Angela Keys (2006) “From Colonial Film Commissioner to Political Pariah: Joris Ivens and the Making of *Indonesia Calling*” paper presented at the Film and History Conference, Melbourne 2006.

been the case in the commercial daily newspapers. The archives of the ISUiA shows that the union's members were eager to participate in the filming and that the union's secretary assisted with its despatch into Indonesia, against Dutch and English wishes, late in 1946.<sup>30</sup> Ivens had, in fact, been commissioned by the Netherlands government to document the expectedly simple reentry of the Dutch into the Netherlands East Indies. However, as a communist who had become committed to supporting the Indonesian nationalists, Ivens hoped to stop that Dutch reentry by filming the story of the boycott with support from the Australian waterfront unions. As he was still under commission to film for the Netherlands, Ivens had to do his filming of the boycott campaign in heavy secrecy. Therefore much of the footage was made by reenacting the strike events, often within days of their original occurrence, and using activists and unionists who were involved in the boycott, rather than by filming the actual events. The reenacted and scripted segments of the film were edited together some time in early 1946 and eventually linked with a carefully scripted voice-over by Australian actor, Peter Finch.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the need for secrecy, a major problem confronting Ivens was that, by the time he began filming the campaign, in November 1945, most of the Indonesians had left Australia, having been repatriated early in October on the *Esperance Bay*.<sup>32</sup> Only a few Indonesian activists remained in Sydney where the filming took place. An even greater problem for Ivens was that the Indonesians had only ever formed a small proportion of the crews on the ships which the Dutch had hoped would take supplies, guns and ammunition to the reentering Dutch force. The majority of the crews on the Dutch KPM ships – and on the British ships which were also carrying supplies and weapons for the Netherlands East Indies – had always been British Indians. While the Australian dockworkers could attempt to stop the loading of the ships, only the Indian crews could stop them leaving shore. This was in fact what had happened, as discussed above and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> In an attempt to find new crews for these ships once the Indian crews had downed tools or had walked off altogether, the British supported the Dutch in recruiting Indian seamen in Bombay and Calcutta, the two major international shipping

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<sup>30</sup> ISUiA Archives, Noel Butlin Archive, E 177; Goodall (2008: 43-68); Goodall (2009: 158-96).

<sup>31</sup> Cottle and Keys (2006).

<sup>32</sup> Lingard (2008: 162-181), the *Esperance Bay* departed Sydney on 13 October; Lockwood (1982: 138-44).

<sup>33</sup> Lockwood (1982: 149-159); Goodall (2008: 56 and throughout).

ports in India. By November, some of these Indian replacement crews had started to arrive, without having been told that their role was to be strike-breaking. The Indian Seamen's Union in Australia took the leading role in contacting these crews, as their Dutch guards tried to move them onto the idle ships to get them out of Australian waters. Only the activist Indians could have made such contacts, as none of the Australian unionists appear to have had any fluency in Bengali, Urdu or Konkani, the main languages spoken by Indian crews.<sup>34</sup> Such contacts often took place in a blaze of publicity. In two instances at least, newly arrived Indian crews on Dutch ships responded to the calls from Indian Seamen's union members in the small boats speeding alongside as they left Sydney Harbour, by mutinying and leaving the ship at the next opportunity.<sup>35</sup> While these dramatic events were ideal for his filmic vision, Ivens was faced with the problem both of filming in the absence of Indonesians and of attempting to reenact the key events.

How did Ivens deal with these problems? In the first place, he remained committed to a simple narrative approach, concentrating on the Indonesians and the Australian unionists. This was perhaps hardly surprisingly given that he was funded by the Waterside Workers' Federation. Consequently there are many scenes valourising the collective decisions to refuse to load the ships taken by the Australian dockworkers, who are repeatedly depicted as the heroes of the campaign. While there are only a few Indonesians visible in the film, they are mostly seen taking active leadership roles and two of them are the only non-Europeans in the whole film who are individually named.

There is no mention of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia anywhere in the film, either in the voice-over or in the credits. In fact, the film has no mention of any longer-term resident Indian population at all. There are a number of key scenes in the film which hinge on Indians being present, but Ivens has edited the story line – and the script – so that the only acknowledged Indians appear to be bewildered crewmen, newly arrived from India, who had been recruited by the British and the Dutch to break the strike.

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<sup>34</sup> The major languages are discussed at length in the ISUiA records in the process of designing the badges and membership book. The secretary, Clarrie Campbell, admitted his ignorance of any Indian languages in 1946; Goodall (2008: 16).

<sup>35</sup> Lockwood (1982: 161-63).

In the first scene, an office used for organising the boycott is shown and two young named Indonesians, Tukliwan and Max Sekantu, are depicted as leaders of the dispute. They hear that a Dutch ship, the *Patras*, has set off with a newly-arrived Indian crew and they rush down, with a number of unidentified white Australians, to jump into a small powerboat and set off in pursuit. Approached a large ship, the small boat's occupants are seen face-on as the boat bounces around on the harbour waves. In the jumpy footage, five people can be made out in the small boat: Possibly one is an Indonesian (although he is not either of the two previously named men), two are white Australians and two are Indians. None of them are identified. Then a close up shot shows one of these Indians – who is however the least easily recognizable as Indian – as he calls out in Urdu or Hindi (the two languages are very similar in this context) to the Indians onboard the *Patras*, “Indian brothers...”, as he begs them not to sail the ship. He is accompanied in this close-up by a white Australian, also unidentified, calling out similar pleas in English. Australian audiences who were seeing the film in 2007, when this research was conducted, assumed they were seeing a white Australian unionist supporting an Indonesian activist. Yet what are we actually seeing?



Screen shot of reenactment in *Indonesia Calling* showing activists in small boat pursuing the *Patras*, reproduced courtesy Heritage Films.

In fact, the Indian in these close-ups was Abdul Rehman, an Indian seaman from the engine room on a steamer.<sup>36</sup> He was also the chairman of the Indian Seamen's Union in

<sup>36</sup> There are a number of named photographs each of Abdul Rehman, Dasrath Singh and Clarrie Campbell in press reports of the ISUiA from 1945. In addition, Singh and Campbell have been identified by the

Australia, and had been in the country from at least the beginning of 1945. He had been an early supporter of the Indonesian call for independence and was one of the founders of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia. Rehman came from the Konkan coast, south of Bombay, and his family lived inland at Poona. Probably from the large community of seafaring peoples who lived along this coastline, from Goa to Bombay, and who had some Arab ancestors as well as Indian, Rehman was a man whose visible racial affiliation was ambiguous. So despite him playing a leadership role, both in the film and in real life, his presence did not alert Australian viewers at the time, or since, to his Indian nationality. Rehman was deported because of his political activity in December 1945, giving us a clear indication of the timing of the film's reenactment.



**Abdul Rehman and Clarrie Campbell, in reenacted scene from *Indonesia Calling*, reproduced courtesy Heritage Films.**

Rehman's white Australian companion, again unidentified, was also a key figure in the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia. He was Clarrie Campbell, a long time Labor party member and supporter of the Australian Communist party who had been organising social and political support for Indian shipping crews in Australia ever since he had returned from meeting Indian troops in the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. He had supported Rehman in establishing the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia and his interest in Indonesia, although enthusiastic, was secondary to his long-term involvement with Indian politics and welfare. At no time in the film, however, are these two men

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Australians interviewed for this project, Phyllis Johnson, Sylvia Mullins and her brother, Jack Mullins, all recorded in interviews in March and April 2007; Goodall (2009).

named, nor is it suggested that it was the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia which had initiated and carried out the negotiations with these incoming Indian crews.

The episode closes with film of the Indians who had been acting the parts of the new crew. After they had mutinied outside the Heads and successfully ensured the return of the ship to port, they are shown arriving in a small tug boat and landing onto a jetty, to the welcome of another unidentified activist. The Indians can be seen in close-up as they disembark from the tug and march three and four abreast up the stairs to the street. The director and film crew would not have expected these Indians to be recognized as those already on strike and living in the strike camp rather than the characters they were acting, namely recent dupes of the Dutch who had just been urged to mutiny and abandon ship.

Yet, as if anticipating this, the Indians taking part in the film had taken a collective step which contradicted the director's imposed narrative. Each of these Indians, all dressed neatly in jackets and many with ties, also wore a badge in their lapel. From the archival records of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia and from newspaper coverage including the *Mirror* on 12 and 18 December, we know these to have been the newly minted badge of the ISUiA.<sup>37</sup> There can be only one message from this: all of the Indian seamen who had taken part in this sequence of the film were actually members of the militant Indian Seamen's Union in Australia. The Union's archives make it clear that the badges had been intensely important as a way to show their legitimacy as a real union and as a testament to their collective solidarity. For a period before the badges could be made, the union members wore cardboard mock-ups of the badge, as a sign that theirs was a real union. Just like the union membership books and book of rules, the badges were important symbols of the union's power to defend their interests and of their collective belonging to it. So the members' decisions to wear those badges during filming carried enormous symbolic significance for them. The filmmaker had directed them to act out the parts of the strikebreakers – and it was the clear intention of the editing of the film to stress Indian subservience to the Dutch until mobilized by the Australian and Indonesian activists – yet this imposed narrative was directly challenged by the undeniable visual presence of those badges.

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<sup>37</sup> ISUiA archives, Noel Butlin Archives, E 177; interviews with Jack Mullins, 2 March 2007; Sylvia Mullins, 13 March 2007; and Phyllis Johnson, 10 May 2007; photographs in *Tribune*, 12 October 1945; 6 November 1945, 9 November 1945, 23 November 1945.



**Reenactment of Indian seamen disembarking after the *Patras* returned, from *Indonesia Calling*, reproduced courtesy Heritage Films.**

Another important sequence shows the big strike meeting in the aftermath of the *Patras* mutiny, chaired by the Indonesian activist Tukliwan. The Indians, supposed in the film to have just been released from their thralldom to the Dutch bosses, had gathered with Chinese and Australian unionists to express their solidarity with the boycott and to rally round the secretary of the Australian Waterside Workers' Federation, "Big Jim" Healey, who is the final, climactic speaker. In this instance, the Indian speaker was another key activist in the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia, Dasrath Singh, who had been in Australia for many months and was a founder of the Union. A charismatic organizer and a talented linguist who was fluent in many Indian languages as well as in English, Singh was a cook from a Dutch ship. His working-class principles, his astute political judgments and his skilful translations and negotiations with all comers, made him well-known and greatly admired among white Australian activists and journalists.<sup>38</sup> Yet, knowing this from the written sources and from the memories of his friends, his physical presence in the film is at first a shock: he was a small man with a high-pitched voice, so not at all a striking presence, and he is initially following a script as he acts the part of spokesman for the duped Indian crewmen. He starts hesitantly, delivering his speech by reading from a piece of paper in his hand:

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<sup>38</sup> Lockwood (1982) and Interviews with Sylvia Mullins, Jack Mullins and Phyllis Johnson, all 2007, see Goodall (2009).

Friends we were informed that we were to take a light ship to take wood to Banyu ...  
But we found ourselves put on a Dutch ship carrying arms and munitions to Indonesia ...  
But we refused to sail with them.

Then he throws the paper aside. His voice strengthens and he looks up to engage directly with the audience – and the camera – as he slips into the assertive, passionate speeches which friends remember that he had in fact been giving over the months beforehand to rally the seamen in the boycott:

The Dutch threatened us with their guns but still we refused.  
And now we will not sail with the ship!  
Their Struggle is Our Struggle! Their Victory is Our Victory!

This sequence visually echoes the earlier one of the returning crewmen. Every Indian in the audience listening to Dasrath Singh is wearing the badge of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia.



Dasrath Singh speaking in reenactment of street corner meeting after *Patras* mutiny, from *Indonesia Calling*, courtesy Heritage Films.

## Conclusion

Can we learn from this analysis of earlier media when we turn to the 2009 coverage of assaults on Indians? The first questions are about how the 1945 news articles and the

documentary related to the previously circulating stereotypes about Indians. Did they perpetuate such stereotypes unchanged? Did they reinvent them to draw on what was useful in changing circumstances? Or did they challenge them altogether? And how can lessons be learnt about how to read news media accounts in order to recognise the marginalized voices and ignored interactions which might be present also in today's media?

These 1945 examples certainly help to explain the Victorian Police Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walshe's easy statement that Indians were "quiet and passive" people who had failed to assert themselves. Walshe echoed the earliest characterizations of indentured Indian "coolie" labourers who were being considered for the Australian pastoral industry in the 1840s, but such stereotypes had not simply passed unchanged over the many decades since then. This "quiet and passive" stereotype of Indians had been discarded during the vitriolic Western Australian campaigns against Indian migration and business involvement in transport during the 1890s, although it had been sustained in the racially-differentiated employment definitions which the Asian Articles had perpetuated throughout the Empire shipping routes, which very much included Australia. The racial differentiation within the seafaring industry had always been opportunistic – justifying stark discrimination in the wages and conditions of a major proportion of the international seafaring labour force.

A similarly opportunistic approach can be traced in the 1940s. The period saw Indians being consistently active in – and often taking leadership of – a major industrial boycott in which they challenged Dutch employers and Australian police. Yet the old "submissive" stereotypes were dragged out and reshaped to fit new times. The newspaper treatments of Indians as "submissive" followers rather than as leading activists ensured that their rational demands could be ignored. The addition of the "frenzied" and "foreign" descriptions (reminiscent of the 1890s WA goldfields), along with the new insinuation of communism, distanced the broader Australian public from the allegedly Indonesian protesters with whom they might have been tempted to sympathise after sharing a wartime alliance. For Ivens, the left wing film-maker, the narrative goal of foregrounding a vivid independence struggle – the Indonesian campaign – which was supported by both Dutch and Australian unionists was worth the excision of the Indians, whose story was less well known to Australians and of no

interest at all to the Dutch. His focused filmic portrayal of heroic Indonesians and Australian unionists simply ignored the complications which explaining the role of the Indians would have involved.

The choices made by the news coverage of the boycott of Dutch shipping in 1945 had certainly echoed down the decades, and have been recalled readily during the recent controversy. The accusation that Indians were “quiet and passive” so they have made themselves into “soft targets” has been helpful in dismissing the students’ arguments that these attacks reflected racially targeted violence. The years since 1945 have complicated the number of stereotypes available, however, and particularly since the first Gulf War and then the Twin Towers attack of 9/11, the stereotypes which depict threatening images of Muslims have centred on men of Middle Eastern background both internationally and among recently immigrant groups in Australia. It is now hard to find any circulating depiction of Indians as Muslims, while men of Lebanese background are assumed to be Islamic. This has resulted in simplistic characterizations of the violent attacks on Indian students, like that in Sydney’s south western suburb of Horsley Park. It has been depicted as a case in which Indian students, assumed to be Hindu, have been victims set upon by young Lebanese men who are assumed in turn to have been Islamic.<sup>39</sup> This narrative of communal violence confirms the negative depictions of both Muslims and young Lebanese men which are currently circulating in Australian media in relation to a number of very different events.<sup>40</sup> Yet within the large South Asian resident population, relatively newly arrived in Horsely Park, are many who are Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims, while the longer established Lebanese populations of the area are Maronite Christians, as have been the young Lebanese men who challenged the Indian student spokespeople. For news media at many different levels of the coverage of these recent conflicts, it has been easier to draw selectively on the stereotypes, however inappropriate, than to inquire into the more complicated realities.

As for the second question of this paper, how news stories are created and retold, these examples show that the 1945 newspaper reports and the film, despite the major role

<sup>39</sup> ABC News broadcast 9 June, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/06/09/2592617.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Kiran Grewal (2007) ‘The ‘Young Muslim Man’ in Australian Public Discourse’, *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, 2 (1): pp116-134

played by the media producers in shaping the narratives, were nevertheless multi-stranded, in that they continued to carry evidence of the very different messages which the protesters, the “sources”, tried to bring to the events. The overall outcomes were the result of the contending narratives of the agents of the action, the protesters, on the one hand and the media workers on the other. To some extent the protesters succeeded. The Indians participating in the making of *Indonesia Calling* had attempted to tell their own story, which was one of agency, initiative and leadership. They had organized themselves into structures and processes which made sense in both India and Australia: the labour union and the direct action of the demonstration. To do so, however, they had drawn on the effective political tactics they had seen honed and used to great effect in the Indian nationalist movement – Gandhian *satyagraha* – which could be translated into the Australian idiom as non-violent non-cooperation. And they had used the politics of rationality, arguing their case as unionists might be expected to do, in lucid and legally defensible terms. At least some of this remains in these articles, either because it was reported on in the more working-class oriented *Mirror* or, where the strategies were not recognized, it remained in the puzzled descriptions of the protesters’ actions.

In each instance, however, whether it was in the newspaper or the film coverage, it was the Indian intervention in the visual language of the medium which was most powerful in retaining evidence of their own narrative. They could not control the headlines of the newspapers, nor the editing and voice-over of the film, and they had no guarantee that their actions would be recorded faithfully in the articles’ text. But their visual interventions were much more permanent. Their very presence in both photographs and film – along with their numerical predominance – meant there was a strong chance they would be recognized eventually. But more assertively, they collectively used the symbol of formal organization, the union badge, in both media and in the film, along with their overall politics of dress, in ways which ensured the evidence of their story would remain visible. Just as important was Dasrath Singh’s choice in *Indonesia Calling* to seize control of the subservient role he was given and to turn it into something very different. Although not at first a commanding presence, he changed that dramatically with his shift from hesitancy to his forceful speech – leaving a lasting message which went far beyond the intentions of the script.

Can we re-compose these 1945 Australian and European media as “Indian Ocean news stories”, to retrieve not only the Indian perspective but also to see the process of interaction with Indonesians and Australians? This is work for the future, to which this paper may contribute by identifying the areas of slippage, where the 1945 media producers’ story has lost its control over the actors’ story. If these were to be recomposed as Indian Ocean stories, however, they firstly need to fulfill the demand made by Margaret Allen that we see all of these Indians with lives in both India and Australia – that we consider how they saw their actions in an Indian context as well as in an Australian one. And then, secondly, to be an “Indian Ocean story”, it would be essential to see how those Indians understood their relationships with the Australians and the Indonesians with whom they were making the news.

Without doubt the great changes between 1945 and the present day in media formats – from newsprint and clumsy film reenactment to digital images, YouTube and internet transmission – have shifted the way that such stereotypes might work. Significantly, they have also opened media products to much wider audiences.

So a second lesson from 1945 would be an expectation that the Indians involved would be organising collectively to pose strategic challenges to the problems they faced and that traces of those strategic, rational interventions are likely to be visible in the media of the day. An example might be the large demonstration by young Indian and Australian students outside Flinders Street Station in Melbourne which continued peacefully all night until it was violently broken up by Victorian police at 5 a.m. on 1 June 2009. While the Australian news voice-overs repeated police statements that there had been extensive student violence, the images showed only the seated and definitely peaceful Indian protesters. The only violence in these images, which were beamed around the world and replayed for days on end, was that of the police as they dragged non-resisting protesters away.

The traces of Indian students’ strategic and collective actions which are able to remain within Australian media coverage will certainly be read very differently by a culturally aware audience – such as that in India and in countries all round the Indian Ocean from which Australia draws its international student enrolments. The Indian Ocean potential of these stories is no longer an academic speculation about the future. Instead, as any

quick visit to Indian television or to an Indian internet news site will demonstrate, like the one where footage of the Victorian police actions at Flinders St ran continuously, it is instead an everyday reality of new media “news”.

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