

CHILDREN ON BOARD: CHILD LABOR ON SHIPS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, C. 18TH – 19TH CENTURIES¹

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has focused on adult Asian sailors' employment on European ships in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. However, the experiences of children who worked on ships in the Indian Ocean World have received comparatively little attention. The scholarly lacuna is striking considering the tremendous increase in the scope and sophistication in the discussions on child slavery and abolition. This article examines the use of children as maritime laborers in the Indian Ocean World between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In doing so, it examines the multiple pathways through which children were brought for work on ships and studies the recruitment patterns of adult and child sailors. It focuses on the various types of labor performed by children on ships and discusses how conditions of servitude on land were transferred to a ship when children accompanied their masters. It then also discusses how prevailing understandings of childhood, domestic service, and child labor shaped the actions of English East India Company officials towards child sailors while undertaking anti-slavery measures during the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

In March 1837, a British officer of the Indian Navy found three slave boys on board two British-registered vessels in Jeddah. Commise, aged 12, was found on *Francis Warren*, and Salim and Singar, aged 13 and 10 respectively, were found on *Futtel Kurreem*. In the

¹I am grateful to Richard Allen for his comments on an earlier draft of the article. I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their thoughtful feedback and to Philip Gooding for his comments. I wish to acknowledge the following institutions that provided financial support that allowed me to conduct research for this article: American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Research Fellowship (2011-12), John Anson Kittredge Educational Fund Research Travel Award (2013), American University of Sharjah Faculty Research Grant (2021-24, FRG21-M-S42).

subsequent enquiry, Commise stated ‘I am a slave. I was purchased by my master, the nakodah [ship commander] ... I was taken to Bombay and Bengal, and brought to this place. I do not get any wages and I expect to be sold whenever my master wishes to part with me. I have neither father nor mother.’ Salim said ‘I am a slave. I was brought ... to Mocha, and there sold to Hoorsie Joseph, who sent me on board the Futtel Kurreem, to be sold at this or any other place. I did not come with my own consent.’ Similarly, Singar testified that he was a slave who was bought by the *nakhuda* and added ‘I was taken to Java, Acheen, and Penang, but never allowed to quit the ship. I receive no wages. I did not come with my own consent ... I was originally from another country. People came and spread dates and fat; I was hungry, and took some to eat. Then they carried me away. I have neither father nor mother.’ The boys were taken from the ships and sent to Bombay to be handed over to the Senior Magistrate of Police. Finally, the boys were given to ‘two respectable Mussulmans [Muslims]’ in Bombay.²

The case highlights several aspects of employing children as maritime labor in the Indian Ocean World. Commise and Singar identified themselves as slaves and indicated their lack of wages, which clearly reveals that they worked on the ship and were not merely being transported as slaves. The ‘owners’ considered food, clothing, and shelter as forms of payment for the boys’ labor. Salim’s situation is less clear since he does not mention wages and might have been solely acquired to be sold. The boys’ testimonies also reveal the use of deception and coercion to bring them on the vessel. Typically, adult sailors on European vessels in the Indian Ocean were hired as part of collective labor-gangs and their hierarchical relationship with their on-board headman did not extend ashore.³ Singar, Commise, and Salim did not operate under this arrangement since they were personal property of the commander, whose ownership over them extended beyond the ship. Therefore, the slave boys were enmeshed in a power relationship system that operated at sea as well as on land.

The presence of slave boys on the *Francis Warren* and *Futtel Kureem* raises questions about the use of children as maritime laborers around the Indian Ocean. In contrast to our limited understanding of child maritime workers, the scholarship on adult Asian sailors working on European vessels, commonly referred to as *lascars*, has come a

² The details of the case and quotes are taken from *Slavery (East Indies)*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 262 (1841), (henceforth PP 1841), 571-9.

³ For a brief description of the recruitment of maritime crews in the Indian Ocean see: Michael Fisher, “Finding lascars ‘wilful incendiary’: British ship-burning panic and Indian maritime labour in the Indian Ocean,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, XXXV (2012), 596-623; G. Balachandran, “Cultures of protest in transnational contexts: Indian seamen abroad, 1885-1945,” *Transforming Cultures*, 3 (2008), 45-75.

long way since Conrad Dixon referred to them as ‘forgotten seamen.’⁴ We now possess a greater understanding of the *lascar* recruitment system, their working conditions and experiences of discrimination, *lascar* acts of resistance, their hardships in Europe, and the consequences on their employment due to the transition from sail to steam technology.⁵ However, the current scholarship focuses on adult sailors, and is largely silent on the presence of children in the maritime labor market.

Examining the use of children as maritime labor in the Indian Ocean region is important for several reasons. It provides a more complete picture of maritime labor recruitment in Asian and African societies. For instance, how were child sailors brought on board? Are there similarities in the recruitment of adult and child sailors? Second, children worked in multiple capacities on board a ship: as crew members as well as servants of the ship’s officers and passengers. These roles were not mutually exclusive since a captain’s servant could serve as a sailor. Therefore, studying child labor on ships will help us comprehend the dynamics of labor arrangement on a ship. Finally, examining the use of children as maritime workers in the Indian Ocean World alongside the use of child labor in other maritime cultures will provide a better understanding of the anti-slave trade efforts by East India Company (EIC) officials during the nineteenth century.

The gap in scholarship on child sailors is in contrast with the growing scope and sophistication of research in the past two decades on child slavery and various forms of child labor. The publication of two edited volumes in 2009 and 2011 by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller marked an important milestone in the emerging shift in studies on child slavery.⁶ The first volume focused on child trafficking in multiple slave trades across the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and the inland routes of Africa. In

⁴ Conrad Dixon, “Lascars: The forgotten seamen,” in *Working Men Who Got Wet: Proceedings of the fourth conference of the Atlantic Canada shipping project, July 24-July 26, 1980*, eds. Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (St John’s, Newfoundland: Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), 265-81.

⁵ Michael Fisher, “Working across the seas: Indian maritime labourers in India, Britain, and in between, 1600-1857,” *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006): 21-45; Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian travellers and settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1986); G. Balachandran, “Circulation through seafaring: Indian seamen, 1890-1945,” in *Society and Circulation: Mobile people and itinerant cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, eds. Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 89-130; James Frey, “Getting away with murder: the wrongful deaths of lascars aboard the *Union* in 1802,” *International Review of Social History*, 59 (2014): 45-68; Aaron Jaffer, “‘Lord of the forecandle’: *Serangs, Tindals*, and lascar mutiny, c. 1780-1860,” *International Review of Social History, Special Issue*, 58 (2013), 153-75; Fisher, “‘Finding lascar ‘wilful incendiarism,’” 596-623; Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard life, unrest, mutiny* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2015). For a discussion of African sailors on board European vessels see: Janet Ewald, “Bondsmen, freedmen, and maritime industrial transportation, c. 1840-1900,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 31 (2010), 451-66.

⁶ Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds, *Children in Slavery Through the Ages* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009); Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds. *Child Slaves in the Modern World* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

addition, the volume examined the multiple roles performed by children in various regions between the eighth and twentieth centuries. Some children worked as privileged slaves, and others were engaged in performing mundane tasks, such as those of a domestic worker.⁷ The second volume studied the important issue of transformations in the institution of child slavery that took place during the era of abolition, described new forms of bondage that replaced earlier systems of slavery, and discussed contemporary forms of child servitude that persist in the late-twentieth century.⁸ In several works, Richard Allen has meticulously detailed the numbers of adult and child slaves trafficked by the European trading companies around the Indian Ocean, chronicled the efforts of British officials in controlling slave trafficking in the nineteenth century, and described the lives of slaves, especially in the Mascarene Islands.⁹

Besides studying children in the slave trade and the various roles performed by them, scholarship has focused attention on the experiences of slave children. This task is complicated by the availability of sources, since children rarely left direct accounts, and those created by adult or freed slaves about their childhood were influenced by their later experiences.¹⁰ Nevertheless, scholars have found innovative ways to read these sources to provide a nuanced portrait of child slaves as active agents in shaping their lives. Jessica Hinchy examined the enslaved childhood experiences of *Khwajaserais* in eighteenth-century India, who were employed as domestic servants but also performed various roles as government officials, military commanders, and administrators. She described the formation of close ties between enslaved children and examined how such relationships shaped their adult life. Hinchy pointed to the lack of ‘resistance’ in the cases of two boys she studied and suggested the model of incorporation of slaves into households as a possible explanation.¹¹ However, children also resisted their enslavement through various

⁷ Campbell, Miers, and Miller, eds. *Children in Slavery Through the Ages*.

⁸ Campbell, Miers, and Miller, eds. *Child Slaves in the Modern World*.

⁹ Richard Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Richard Allen, “Children and European slave trading in the Indian Ocean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 35-54; Richard Allen, “A traffic repugnant to humanity: Children, the Mascarene slave trade and British abolitionism,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 27, 2 (2006), 219-36; Richard Allen, “Licentious and unbridled proceedings: The illegal slave trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the early nineteenth century,” *Journal of African History* 42, 1 (2001), 91-116; Richard Allen, “Suppressing a nefarious traffic: Britain and the abolition of slave trading in India and the Western Indian Ocean, 1770-1830,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 66, 4 (2009), 873-94; Richard Allen, “Maria Rozette and her world: Class, ethnicity, gender, and race in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mauritius,” *Journal of Social History* 45, 2 (2011), 345-65.

¹⁰ Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, “Editors’ Introduction” in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 1.

¹¹ Jessica Hinchy, “Enslaved childhoods in eighteenth-century Awadh,” *South Asian History and Culture*, 6, 3 (2015), 380-400.

means, including go-slows, performing sub-standard work, engaging in sabotage or arson, escaping temporarily, or even poisoning their owners.¹²

The growing body of scholarship on child slavery and bondage has highlighted several aspects of entry into slavery, conditions of life under slavery, and the complicated meanings of emancipation. A notable gap in this scholarship is work on the use of children as maritime workers. This is significant since maritime transport comprised a significant means of transporting slaves in the Indian Ocean World. As Fred Morton noted, children who were transported from the interior to the coast were often made to work.¹³ It is not hard to image a similar situation for children who were being shipped as slaves. Philip Morgan reminds us:

maritime slavery is thus not only about objects being moved but also about subjects doing the moving. Some slaves were actors, not simply the acted-upon. They moved commodities, not merely represented commodities. They were pilots, sailors, canoemen, divers, linguists, porters, stewards, cooks, and cabin boys, not forgetting all the ancillary workers in port such as stevedores, warehousemen, labourers, grumetes, washerwomen, tavern workers, and prostitutes.¹⁴

It is important to recognize that not all maritime child workers were slaves. Nevertheless, studying the issue of child labor in the maritime world will illustrate the various forms of bondage that weld children to maritime work.

The article points to the existence of multiple modes of entry for children into the maritime labor market and describes the variety of services performed by them. A key aspect of the experiences of child laborers was their unfree status. In the system of slavery practiced in the Atlantic plantations, a person's status was cast in the binary mode of 'slave' or 'free.' Research on labor systems in the Indian Ocean world has shown the futility of applying the plantation model of slavery, since a wide variety of forms of slavery existed across the Indian Ocean World and only some of which corresponded to the chattel slavery implemented in the Atlantic plantations. In the Indian Ocean World, a

¹² Cecily Jones, "Youthful rebels: Young people, agency, and resistance against colonial slavery in the British Caribbean plantation world," in *Child Slaves in the Modern World*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 64-83.

¹³ Fred Morton, "Small change: Children in the nineteenth-century East African slave trade," in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 55-70.

¹⁴ Philip Morgan, "Maritime slavery," *Slavery and Abolition*, 31 (2010), 311-26.

person's status could vary along a continuum from slavery to freedom, and labor systems were specific to a region and period. Besides the variety of forms of slavery, the Indian Ocean World also contained forms of coercive labor involving 'free' people, which was characterized by restrictions on mobility and personal freedom, use of physical violence, and even transfer of individuals.¹⁵ James Watson has proposed a useful framework in which he classified slavery institutions as 'open' and 'closed' systems. In 'open' systems, slaves could be absorbed into the dominant society over a period of time. A 'closed' system, however, maintained hard boundaries that separated free and unfree peoples. In Indian Ocean societies, people were enmeshed in ties of obligations and responsibility to those of higher and lower status.¹⁶ Richard Eaton has made a similar observation about slavery in South Asia when he stated that 'enslavement was a 'process' and master-slave relations could change over time.'¹⁷ The child maritime workers discussed in this article were either owned explicitly as slaves or operated under conditions that made them *de facto* slaves of their supervisors.

The use of children in unfree conditions as maritime workers and the persistence of this practice during the nineteenth century, a period marked by measures against slave trade and slavery, can be attributed to prevailing notions of childhood and use of child labor across maritime cultures. This is partly the result of a lack of clarity in defining children and the evolving notions of childhood. Richard Allen noted that in the Atlantic World, height was often used to categorize children and adults, whereas in the Indian Ocean World, a person's perceived age was utilized. According to Allen, in French-controlled Mascarenes, individuals younger than 14 were identified as boys and girls.¹⁸ In the Indian Ocean world, the boundaries of transition from a child to a youth and finally an adult were less precisely defined. British officials in Moluccas defined a child as 10 years or younger, and youths may be between 11 and possibly 16 years of age.¹⁹

Taken together, the circumstances surrounding their 'child' status and the restrictions on their freedom played significant roles in shaping the processes by which

¹⁵ Gwyn Campbell, "Slavery and other forms of unfree labor in the Indian Ocean World," in *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London: Frank Cass, 2005), vii-xxiv; Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 18-34.

¹⁶ Gwyn Campbell, "Servitude and the changing face of the demand for labor in the Indian Ocean World, c. 1800-1900," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, eds. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 25, 28.

¹⁷ Richard Eaton, "Introduction," in *Slavery & South Asian History*, eds. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

¹⁸ Allen, "Children and European slave trading in the Indian Ocean," 38.

¹⁹ Ibid.

children became maritime laborers and the types of work performed by them. The article's analysis begins with a discussion of the recruitment system of child sailors. The subsequent section examines the types of work performed by children and the experiences of children on board ships. Finally, the article assesses the reasons for the uneven implementation of anti-slave trade legislation, specifically the 1811 Slave Trade Felony Act, during instances of children found on ships.

PATTERNS OF RECRUITMENT OF CHILD MARITIME WORKERS

Two systems for the recruitment of children aboard ships can be identified. The first method involved the acquisition of children by the owners and crewmembers of vessels. The testimonies of Commise, Salim, and Singar reveal how the ship's personnel either purchased or simply obtained children and brought them on board. The second method consisted of the use of labor contractors, who operated in ports and were often used to recruit adult sailors. The next two subsections discuss these two methods, respectively. The information discussed is drawn from incidents in which EIC officials detained several vessels in the Indian Ocean on suspicion of trafficking children. Shipping children does not automatically constitute the use of children as maritime labor since they could be transported solely for sale. Therefore, the details of the cases presented in this article are scrutinized for use or possible intent to utilize these children for maritime work. These cases do not represent a comprehensive list of instances of child labor on ships in the Indian Ocean; in fact, it is important to recognize that EIC officials inspected vessels to check for child trafficking and not to investigate the employment of children on ships.

Acquisition of children by shipowners and crewmembers

In March 1790, several children reached Madras (Chennai, South India) on board vessels that arrived from ports in the northern Madras Presidency (present-day Andhra Pradesh in South India). After a crewmember was caught attempting to sell a child, EIC officials gathered forty-one children (twenty girls and twenty-one boys) from the houses and boats belonging to Indian merchants and sailors. The police apprehended six merchants on suspicion of purchasing children with the intention of selling them as slaves. The merchants submitted a petition to the Acting Justice at Madras that narrated the circumstances of their possession of the children. They explained that about twenty vessels sailed from Madras and landed their goods in the northern Madras Presidency. The merchants claimed that several people sold them their children as a result of a famine

in the region and declared that they each bought one or two children that were boarded in their own vessels, and that they ‘maintained and nourished [the children] as our own sons.’²⁰ The petitioners requested the official to return ‘our said children’ and the goods that were confiscated.²¹ The Company decided to return the children to their places of origin, except in cases of children who wished to work and remain in Madras.²²

In February 1793, three boats were seized in Madras on suspicion of carrying children for sale. Subsequently, officials raided other vessels in the port and found seventeen boys and five girls. In a separate operation, thirty-six boys and four girls were found in several houses in the ‘Blacktown’²³ part of Madras. The vessels’ owners wrote to the Governor and explained that they accepted the children at the northern ports from people who were suffering from severe famine. They indicated that the children were not acquired to be sold, but rather to relieve them from poverty. Unlike the 1790 case referred to above, the petitioners indicated their willingness to return the children, but requested the release of their boats and crewmembers.²⁴ However, the Governor decided to sell the boats by auction and to use the sale’s proceeds for the children’s upkeep. In another instance in July 1825, the Assistant Magistrate of Tanjore, R.A. Bannerman, informed the District Collector that some ‘Lubbay people’²⁵ of Nagapattinam (a coastal town located 200 miles south of Madras) brought three boys from Madras. Bannerman ascertained that the boys did not have any relatives in Madras and that they had accompanied the Lubbay men voluntarily in order to avoid starvation. Bannerman told the Collector that the merchants agreed to pay the port officials an amount as security that they would not sell or export the boys and that they would produce the boys whenever required.²⁶

In these three instances, only minimal details are available in the EIC records, and we do not possess information on the merchants’ intent to acquire children. But an instance of child trafficking prosecuted by EIC officials in 1839 provides voluminous details and gives insight into the rationale behind procuring children. In November 1839, Captain Christopher Biden, the Master-Attendant and Beach Magistrate of Madras port, detained the crew of *Mydeen Bux* en route from Bengal to Nagore (a coastal town located

²⁰ *Slavery in India*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 125 (1828) (Henceforth PP 1828), 468-69.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 469.

²³ The portion of Madras that was inhabited by Indians was called Blacktown and the section of the city where the Europeans resided was called Georgetown.

²⁴ PP 1828, 514.

²⁵ Lubbay was one of the terms used by EIC officials to refer to Tamil-speaking Muslims. The term is also spelled as Lubbies and Lebbais.

²⁶ India Office Records, British Library (IOR), Extract of Fort St. George Judicial Consultations, July 22, 1825, IOR/F/4/1034/28499.

200 miles south of Madras), on charges of kidnapping children and carrying them for sale as slaves at Nagore and at various Malay ports along Sumatra's coast. The enquiry revealed that the boat had put into Calingapatam (Kalingapatnam), a port in the northern Madras Presidency, to seek shelter from bad weather. During this stopover, the *nakhuda* and the crew gathered twenty-eight children from neighboring towns and brought them on board the vessel.²⁷ The case against the ship's commander and crew was eventually dismissed in the Supreme Court of Judicature at Madras on a technicality due to an omission in the formal indictment.²⁸

However, the case provides several interesting details about the process of acquisition of children. J. Conway, the Head Assistant Magistrate of Ganjam, conducted enquiries regarding the children at a charitable asylum in Chicacole (near Calingapatam) that was managed by a Christian missionary to help people fleeing drought afflicting the neighboring Vizagapatam (Vishakapatnam) district. An asylum worker informed Conway that he saw a boy, who had previously sought food at the asylum. The boy's head was shaved, and he informed the worker that he had decided to join the 'Cholia people'²⁹ from Nagore, who promised to 'take better care of him.'³⁰ The worker informed Conway that the 'strangers of the Cholia caste' stayed in the house of Meerasaib whenever they passed through Chicacole. Upon being questioned, Meerasaib told Conway that the *nakhuda* of *Mydeen Bux* stayed in his house for about two months while the vessel's cargo was being sold. He indicated that some of the ship's crew visited the nearby town of Bimlipatnam, a former Dutch-controlled port near Calingapatam, and returned with four boys. Subsequently, the vessel sailed to Calingapatam where it was forced to seek shelter from bad weather.³¹ The ship's crew rented some houses from Calingapatam's inhabitants and the village barber told Conway that he shaved the heads of fifteen or sixteen boys at the house rented by the *nakhuda*.³² Conway came across resident Chulias in Chicacole and Calingapatam with children in their homes who were acquired from others, and he noted a fifteen year old boy in a Chulia home who had 'adopted their [Chulia] dress and caste.'³³

²⁷ IOR, IOR/F/4/1836/76287.

²⁸ Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai (TNSA), Marine Consultations, 20 Jan. 1840, Vol. 6, 144-45.

²⁹ The term is used to refer to Tamil-speaking Muslims, who formed an important maritime trading community in the Bay of Bengal littoral. It is also spelt as Chulia or Choolia.

³⁰ IOR, Conway to The Magistrate of Ganjam, 21 Nov. 1839, IOR/F/4/1836/76287.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. While the rationale for shaving the boys' heads is not discussed in the records, EIC officials mentioned this aspect of the acquisition of the boys. The fact that the shaving was done for all acquired boys suggests that the shaving might have constituted a ritualic act that implied the formation of new relationships for the boys and/or the discarding of old ties with the boys' families.

³³ Ibid. The boy was adopted at the age of three when his parents died.

Coinciding with the detention of *Mydeen Bux*, another vessel, *Streevesha Lutchmy*, which returned to Madras from Rangoon, was found with ten children on board. Since port officials in Madras were unable to determine that the children were kidnapped, the Beach Magistrate ordered the *nakhuda* to pay a penalty bond for one year and held the crew liable to prosecution and loss of their vessel if they were implicated in a criminal offense during the year.³⁴ In July 1840, four boys were found on a boat that arrived at Nagore from Calcutta. Upon questioning, the boys revealed that they were from the northern Madras Presidency. The Magistrate of Vizagapatam conducted an enquiry during which the boys' relatives informed him that they 'had disposed of their children willingly and were not desirous for their return.' In consequence, the boys were returned to the boat's crew.³⁵

During the investigation into the *Mydeen Bux* incident, representatives of the Muslim community in Nagore denied their participation in any slave trade; however, they admitted to purchasing children from parents during seasons of scarcity. They told the Acting Magistrate of Tanjore that such children were raised as 'slaves or rather servants for domestic purposes' and that 'several of the traders and shopkeepers in the town of Nagore own their present station in society to their having been thus purchased when children.'³⁶ This hints at the possible intent for acquiring children as labor for multiple tasks, such as domestic help, work in retail operations, and navigating vessels. This is revealed in a comment by the Magistrate of Vizagapatam, who noted in his investigation that the Tamil Muslims acquired the children 'to procure converts to their religion, lascars for their vessels and slaves for domestic purposes.'³⁷

In response to a questionnaire on slavery that was circulated by the Law Commissioners in London, G.S. Hooper, the Judge of Madura (Madurai, South India), reported that Muslims purchased children during times of scarcity and also bought children who were stolen or kidnapped. He noted that children thus acquired were brought up as Muslims and rose to 'much consequences in the family ... that they are no longer regarded as slaves, but become as members of the family.'³⁸ Despite such observations, which portray a picture of benevolence, the unequal status of such children within the family was maintained. For example, the judge noted that these children were married to

³⁴ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 11 Jan. 1840, Vol. 6, 114-16.

³⁵ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 16 July 1840, Vol. 8, 858-60.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 24 Dec. 1839, Vol. 6, 19-20.

³⁸ "Appendix IX" in PP 1841, 455.

Muslim women who were ‘of a lower grade.’³⁹ The process of assimilation of these slave children occurred over generations. Hooper alluded to such a long process when he noted that after three generations, the descendants of the slave children were considered as ‘pure Mussulmans [sic] and are admitted to all rights and privileges as such.’⁴⁰

The Magistrate of Ganjam, R.A. Bannerman, in his answers to questions regarding slavery in India sent by EIC officials in London, remarked that the Tamil Muslims of Nagore and other southern ports adopted children of other castes. He added that these children were used as domestics in their homes, as maritime labor on ships, and in commercial transactions.⁴¹ Regarding the case against the crew of *Mydeen Bux*, Bannerman noted that he ‘had an opportunity of seeing something of the Lubbies in the Tanjore and Madura districts ... and I am disposed to think that in obtaining these children the people of the Moydeen Bux [*Mydeen Bux*] had no criminal intention of selling them again as slaves for the sake of credit.’⁴² Bannerman was in a position to observe closely the issue of slave trading since he served as the Assistant Magistrate in Tanjore in 1825 and records show that he had investigated allegations of slave trade in children against Tamil Muslims.⁴³

These cases show two common features: first, the stated use of famine by the purchasers to justify the acquisition of children, and second, the procurement of a small number of children by multiple individuals rather than the purchase of a large number of children by a single buyer. They reveal the extent to which merchants and crew members utilized the conditions of scarcity to procure children. Some crewmembers acquired children to sell as slaves, while others used them as domestic workers and sailors. The acquisition and employment of boys as sailors suggests an arrangement in which children were procured and slowly integrated into the families of the owners. It is possible that the process of integration was neither uniform nor guaranteed and the boys could remain as mere workers or could be transferred or sold. Indeed, Commise’s statement ‘I expect to be sold whenever my master wishes to part with me’ underscores the precarity of his situation.

³⁹ PP 1841, 126, 455.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ PP 1841, 117.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ PP 1828, 931-32.

Recruitment of children through labor contractors

While acquisition of children by shipowners and crewmembers constituted one means of finding child sailors, the use of labor contractors formed another way of bringing children on board ships. Labor contractors were often used to recruit adult sailors, especially by Europeans. Both the Dutch East India Company (VOC: *De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) and the EIC relied on an onshore labor contractor, known as *ghat syrang* by the EIC and as *zielverkoper* by the VOC, to recruit adult Asian sailors.⁴⁴ Typically, the labor contractor selected or worked with a *syrang* (headman) to identify the crew. Unlike the *ghat syrang* and *zielverkoper*, who stayed on shore, the *syrang* accompanied the crew and was the highest-ranking Asian sailor aboard European ships. Michael Fisher called this practice a collective labor system since *lascars* formed part of a labor gang and did not negotiate individual contracts with their employers. The *lascars* followed instructions from the *syrang*, an arrangement that was only grudgingly accepted by the vessel's European officers, since it formed a parallel command structure. This collective labor system, according to Fisher, ended in 1850 with the passage of the Merchant Seamen Act that required the registration of *lascars* with the Registrar of Merchant Seamen, whose office regulated their recruitment.⁴⁵ Generally, the sailors were paid a portion of their wages in advance, the remainder being given to them at the completion of the voyage. In the case of the VOC, the wages were paid in a staggered manner, since the Asian sailors were typically hired on a three-year contract.⁴⁶ While the research on *lascars* has focused mainly on their employment by European trading companies and on transoceanic steamers, work by Anne Bulley on English private traders along India's west coast and Aaron Jaffer's research on *lascar* unrest and mutiny in the Indian Ocean have revealed that European private merchants engaged in intra-Asian trade that also depended on labor contractors.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ghulam A. Nadri, "Sailors, *Zielverkopers*, and the Dutch East India Company: The maritime labour market in eighteenth-century Surat," *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (2015), 336-64; G. Balachandran, "Searching for the *Sardar*: Pre-capitalist institutions and human agency in the maritime labour market, Calcutta, 1880-1935," in *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, eds. Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206-36. By the late-nineteenth century, the term *lascar* identified Asian, and especially Indian sailors, working on European vessels, but the term was not used universally by Europeans to identify Asian sailors. Asian sailors working for the Dutch East India Company were usually identified as 'moor' or 'inland' sailors during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See: Matthias van Rossum, "Lost in translation? Maritime identity and identification in Asia under the VOC," *Journal for Maritime Research*, 16, 2 (2014), 139-52.

⁴⁵ Michael H. Fisher, "Indian *ghat sarangs* as maritime labour recruiting intermediaries during the age of sail," *Journal for Maritime Research* 16, 2, (2014), 153-66.

⁴⁶ Nadri, "Sailors, *Zielverkopers*, and the Dutch East India Company," 351-2; Fisher, "Working across the Seas," 26-7.

⁴⁷ Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833* (Richmond: Routledge, 2000); Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*.

Available evidence indicates that labor contractors also provided children to ship captains, as is revealed in the following two cases. In October 1789, Mahmud Bucksh lodged a complaint with Calcutta port officials against Imaumodin and Moochnee for kidnapping his brother Badoolah on board a ship in Calcutta. Imaumodin, and Moochnee, who was reported to have been a ‘crimp for some time,’ claimed that they helped a starving Badoolah by handing him over to Ruffee, a *syrang* who was used to ‘procure lascars for ships.’ Ruffee sent Badoolah on board a ship and Moochnee acted as Badoolah’s security. Bucksh refuted the claim that his brother was starving and pointed out that Badoolah was already employed as a ‘journeyman embroider’ under Rehimoo, who testified that Badoolah worked for him as a servant for ‘four rupees per month and a piece of meal once a day.’⁴⁸

In another incident in October 1789, four boys and two girls were found on board the vessel *Hero* and brought ashore in Calcutta. The search of *Hero* was carried out after a woman, Paulingee, complained to the police that deception was used to persuade her fifteen-year-old son Jomun⁴⁹ to board the vessel. Jomun claimed that he was a *coolie* and that Eesa, the *syrang* of *Hero*, told him he would receive money to carry fish to the vessel. Once Jomun had boarded the vessel, Eesa did not allow him to leave because he had paid Jomun’s wages to his parents. However, Jomun’s father claimed that he had received no money from Eesa. Budderoden (possibly involved in onshore labor recruitment) claimed under oath that he had recruited twenty-four men for the *Hero* and that Eesa had paid him for his services. Budderoden claimed that Jomun’s mother had agreed that her son would receive three and a half rupees per month. She initially claimed that she did not receive any money, but later reported that she had accepted two rupees worth of clothes from Eesa.⁵⁰ Harreah, another child found on the *Hero*, claimed that he was a beggar in Calcutta when he was taken on board the ship. Obdah, aged 10, claimed that a man brought him to the *syrang*, who gave Obdah food and clothes and ten days later took Obdah on board the vessel. Sakeboden claimed that he was caught stealing and that the police peons brought him to the ship. Rishmee (aged 8) stated that she was begging in the *bazaar* when she was taken by Brijoo Seree, who handed her over to Eesa along with another girl, Utta, who claimed that Eesa gave her some clothes and promised to marry her.⁵¹

⁴⁸ PP 1828, 25.

⁴⁹ In the records, Jomun was also spelled as Ioomun.

⁵⁰ PP 1828, 25-26.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The two cases reveal several aspects of recruitment of children by shipowners and commanders by utilizing the services of maritime labor contractors. First, the wage payment structure was similar for boys and men, consisting of an initial payment upfront and monthly wages. Jomun's wage was settled at three and a half rupees each month and he received a 'gold two anna piece as earnest,' whereas the men were paid four months wages in advance.⁵² But there were some further differences as well. The absence of a fixed advance sum for Jomun suggests an irregular system for remunerating children and an associated risk of arbitrary wage amounts. Jomun's parents received a payment of two rupees, although it is unclear whether the payment was made to both of them and whether it was paid in cash or material. Second, the manner of recruitment entailed considerable risk for the children. For instance, Badoolah was taken on a ship without his brother's knowledge.⁵³ This would have deprived Badoolah of any layer of protection on the ship, since he would have operated under the total control of the ship's *syrang*. Third, the recruitment operations reveal the use of a variety of options to find children: the use of deception, negotiations with parents, using police personnel to find juvenile offenders, and relying on middlemen to find destitute children. Fourth, the children possessed diverse life histories: Harreah, Obdah, Rishmee, and Utta appear to have been orphans when they were taken, whereas Jomun and Badoolah were living with family members. Finally, the presence of girls raises questions about their role on board vessels. In the case involving *Hero*, two girls, Utta and Rishmee, were found on the vessel. Rishmee was eight years old, but Utta's age is unclear. Eesa claimed that he found Utta and Rishmee begging, that Utta asked him to marry her, and that she would adopt Rishmee.⁵⁴ The implicit message in Eesa's claim could have been that Utta, in exchange for marriage, promised to help Eesa and also recruit an additional member. The presence of women and girls as part of the crew was not uncommon. In discussing the mutiny on the *Arabella*, Aaron Jaffer has described the presence of a slave girl who was mentioned as the 'captain's girl,' and indicated that crew members sometimes were accompanied by enslaved girls or women.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 26.

⁵³ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Aaron Jaffer, "The last voyage of *Arabella*: Life and death aboard a British country ship," *Journal for Maritime Research*, 16, 2 (2014), 187.

CHILDREN AND WORK ON SHIPS

Scholarship on slavery and unfree labor in the Indian Ocean World (IOW) has demonstrated that, on land, girls and boys performed a variety of roles for their ‘owners.’⁵⁶ In many instances, children also accompanied their owners on sea voyages to serve them in the same capacity as on shore. The cases of Salim, Singar, and Commise reveal the use of children as workers on ships. This section discusses those children who were forced into ‘unfree’ labor at sea, where they performed two broad types of work. Boys undertook a variety of low-skilled tasks, and both boys and girls acted as servants to passengers and high-level crewmembers.

The widespread use of boys as workers on ships is evident in the records of EIC officials. In the *Mydeen Bux* incident discussed above, when Captain Biden found twenty-eight children on the vessel, he noted the presence of an additional four boys ‘*who are supposed to belong to the Brig [Mydeen Bux].*’⁵⁷ These four children declared their status as cook boys.⁵⁸ Biden noted further in reference to the four cook boys that ‘all native vessels have some boys on board.’⁵⁹ While most boys served as crew, it was commented of some found on the *Streevescha Lutchmy* that they were ‘too young for service on board any vessel.’⁶⁰ In another case in July 1840, four boys discovered aboard a ship sailing from Calcutta to Nagore were returned to the captain both because their parents acknowledged giving them away and the boys declared their wish to remain as sailors.⁶¹ The use of boys as maritime workers was commonplace, as indicated in ship registers from Nagore and Nagapattinam. In 1840, for example, the *Somasoondra Poravy* (280 tons) of Nagore was registered with a crew of 50 ‘men and boys.’ The *Tinnagavully* (180 tons) of Nagore had a crew of 30 men and boys. Similarly, in Nagapattinam, the vessels *Chindateray Maria* (80 tons), *Maria* (72 tons), and *Tendapany Aunayletchumy* (100 tons) required crews that numbered 20, 15, and 20 men and boys respectively.⁶²

Examples of boys performing low-skilled jobs on vessels can be found in several maritime cultures. In discussing the presence of slave and ‘non-white’ children in late-eighteenth century France, Pierre Boulle noted that French ship captains and owners

⁵⁶ Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph Miller, “Editors’ Introduction,” 1-15.

⁵⁷ IOR, Captain Biden to the Chief Secretary to Government, 7 Nov. 1839, Fort St. George, IOR/F/4/1836/76287. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 1 Feb. 1840, Vol. 6, 220-25.

⁵⁹ IOR, Chris Biden, Beach Magistrate, to the Chief Secretary to Government, 16 May 1843, Fort St. George, IOR/F/4/1965/86102.

⁶⁰ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 11 Jan. 1840, Vol. 6, 114-16.

⁶¹ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 16 July 1840, Vol. 8, 858-60.

⁶² TNSA, Marine Consultations, 23 Aug. 1841, Vol. 14, 1026-30.

acquired slaves to work as cabin boys and cooks; in some cases, the boys received normal wages, indicating their free status, whereas others received extremely low wages, implying their slave status. Certain boys served their masters as interpreters, a job that was more privileged than that of a cook.⁶³ With reference to the East African slave trade, Fred Morton noted a slave boy, Ismael Smeler, who scraped the hulls of a ship,⁶⁴ while Janet Ewald has revealed the use of boys on pearl boats in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁵ In some cases, emancipated boys joined Indian and Royal Navy vessels as cabin boys or fan operators.⁶⁶ The *La Amistad* trial revealed the presence of at least one child among the vessel's crew, although the precise nature of the child's work is not provided.⁶⁷ The marine apprenticeship program in Britain was designed to train and send out boys to work on ships.⁶⁸

Some children also accompanied their masters on ships in the capacity of servants. In September 1789, four boys and four girls, aged between six and twelve, were found by the police in Calcutta in the house of Borel, a Swiss officer based in Colombo. Borel claimed that he had purchased six of the children as 'servants for himself and officers' and that the remaining two were the 'property of Milliat from Chandernagore.'⁶⁹ The police also learned of the presence of children on the ship, *Charlotte*, which was due to be boarded by Borel, and were informed that more children were to be brought to the vessel. Borel requested the release of two children 'to wait upon me as servants on board' and declared they would not be treated or sold as slaves. In the end, EIC officials permitted Borel to take two children on-board the *Charlotte*.⁷⁰

In another case in April 1791, seventeen girls and seven boys were found on a vessel chartered by Vialias, a Frenchman, for a voyage from Calcutta to Pondicherry (South India). The children, aged between seven and seventeen, were taken onshore from the vessel by EIC authorities. Another two boys and two girls were not taken ashore since

⁶³ Pierre H. Boule, "Slave and other nonwhite children in late-eighteenth-century France," in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 176.

⁶⁴ Morton, "Small change: Children in the nineteenth-century East African slave trade," 63.

⁶⁵ Janet Ewald, "African bondsmen, freedmen, and the maritime proletariats of the northwestern Indian Ocean World, c. 1500-1900," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, eds. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 200, 204-5.

⁶⁶ Janet Ewald, "Bondsmen, freedmen, and maritime industrial transportation," 451-60.

⁶⁷ Benjamin Lawrence, "'All we want is make us free': The voyage of *La Amistad*'s children through the worlds of the illegal slave trade," in *Child Slaves in Modern World*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 14.

⁶⁸ Caroline Withall, "'And since that time has never been heard of ...' The forgotten boys of the sea: Marine Society merchant sea apprentices, 1772-1873," *Journal for Maritime Research*, 22, 1-2 (2020), 1-23.

⁶⁹ PP 1828, 22.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

Monsieur Jordan, the supercargo of the vessel, asserted that they were his servants. Jordan also claimed exception for another boy and a girl who were the servants of the ship's boatswain.⁷¹ Jordan was hired as the ship's supercargo without any payment, but was provided a cabin and free passage. Later, Jordan brought along the boatswain and the six children as servants. The shipowner complained that he had to forgo the freight charges for the children since Vialias insisted on a free passage for the children because they were servants. Jordan returned to Calcutta with his 'servants' as EIC officials sought to prosecute him for conveying children to be sold as slaves in Pondicherry.⁷²

The practice of carrying servants on ships or claiming slaves as servants continued up to the late nineteenth century. For example, in October 1872, a small and a large *dhow*⁷³ were stopped off the coast of Oman on suspicion of transporting slaves. However, the vessels were not confiscated since the slaves discovered on them were determined to be the captains' 'domestic' slaves. The smaller ship's captain had five slaves – three men, a boy, and a woman. The British Consul, in a report on the incident, noted 'instead of being paid regular wages, they are paid ½ proceeds of sale of [?], dates, and fish. They are not maimed or confined in any way, but merely worked the dhow and the women were servants of the captain's family which is equivalent to what are termed domestic slaves.' The larger *dhow* had a boy, identified as the captain's 'boy or servant,' who received food and clothing but no salary.⁷⁴

The cases discussed above provide clues to the types of tasks carried out by children on ships as well as a point of entry to understand the experiences of child maritime workers. In ships with several dozen crewmembers, only a few possessed highly specialized navigation skills.⁷⁵ Most sailors performed a variety of low-skilled jobs on ships and at port, such as loading and unloading cargo, fetching water, serving as watchmen, pumping out water from the ship, and as servants.⁷⁶ The differences in maritime skills produced a hierarchy among the crewmembers. Morgan stated that 'a skilled mariner looked down on an ordinary seaman, even more so on stewards, cooks and

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 30-33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷³ Indigenous sailing vessels found in the western Indian Ocean.

⁷⁴ Mandana E. Lambert, "'If you catch me again, put me to death': Slave trading, paper trails, and British bureaucracy in the Indian Ocean," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, eds. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 125-6.

⁷⁵ Yrjö Kaukiainen, "The maritime labour market: Skill and experience as factors of demand and supply," in *Sail and Steam: Selected maritime writings of Yrjö Kaukiainen*, eds. Lars U. Scholl and Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 45-52.

⁷⁶ Nadri, "Sailors, *Zielverkopers*, and the Dutch East India Company," 345.

cabin boys, some of the lowliest occupations afloat.⁷⁷ Since children were frequently assigned these low-skilled jobs, they were disdained by adult sailors.

Adults as well as children performed low-skilled jobs on the ship, and this affected their social status. For a child worker, his or her child status also shaped their experience on a vessel. Emerging scholarship on child slavery is pointing out how assumptions of childhood as marked by ‘innocence’ and ‘dependency’ encouraged the practices of control over children.⁷⁸ Under such conditions, child workers faced an additional layer of subjugation, since any form of control was viewed as necessary to discipline and teach them work skills. Thus, older sailors would have ordered the child workers to perform additional work beyond their ‘normal’ set of tasks. A child’s slave or unfree status also shaped their experiences of work. A child worker who was deemed to be the ‘property’ of an officer or a passenger might avoid harsh working conditions or being controlled by multiple taskmasters. At the same time, slave status could also serve as a source of physical harm. In the case of unrest on board the ship *Lark* in 1783, Jack, an enslaved boy belonging to the captain, helped the captain in a fight with the mutineers. After usurping control of the ship, the mutineers tied Jack to the ship and set it on fire.⁷⁹ But, being a captain’s slave also provided close and unfettered access to the captain. Some child slaves utilized this advantage to escape during incidents of unrest on a ship. During a mutiny on the *Arabella* in 1813, the captain’s two enslaved boys aided the mutineers and escaped with them. A girl, Ujan, who was enslaved by the captain, was taken away by the mutineers.⁸⁰ For girl servants, being taken by mutineers presented new challenges. While Ujan was rescued, Jaffer notes that girls who were taken by the mutineers during unrest on ships could be given to local coastal rulers as ‘one part of the complex negotiations’ between the mutineers and the local authorities.⁸¹ In general, opportunities for escape for children from ships were rare and fraught with risks.

SLAVE TRADE FELONY ACT AND MARITIME CHILD LABOR

The presence of child workers on ships, under conditions of slavery or unfree labor, during the nineteenth century raises questions about the implementation of laws that were passed

⁷⁷ Morgan, “Maritime slavery,” 317.

⁷⁸ Anna Mau Duane, “Introduction: When is a child a slave?,” in *Child Slavery before and after Emancipation: An argument for child-centered slavery studies*, ed. Anna Mau Duane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-22.

⁷⁹ Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*, 151.

⁸⁰ Jaffer, “The last voyage of the *Arabella*,” 186-8.

⁸¹ Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*, 157.

to abolish the slave trade and slavery. This section examines the discussions among East India Company officials regarding the implementation of Act 51 Geo III. C. 23, commonly known as the Slave Trade Felony Act of 1811. This law, while making the slave trade a felony, permitted the transportation of slaves from one British settlement to another in the West Indies, but such an allowance was not extended to India and other areas in Asia held under the EIC or the Crown. Despite the stringent nature of this regulation, EIC officials did not pursue a uniform approach in dealing with the presence of children on ships, who were often claimed as domestic servants. In fact, sailors and passengers in the Indian Ocean often claimed onboard children as servants or family members.⁸²

The ambivalent policy towards domestic slaves cannot be attributed to a lack of knowledge of indigenous maritime practices in the Indian Ocean, since EIC officials in India and the Straits Settlements (Penang, Singapore, and Malacca) discussed precisely the applicability of anti-slave trade laws, including in cases of domestic slaves accompanying their masters on ships. EIC officials were acutely aware that the Slave Trade Felony Act did not permit the transportation of slaves between settlements under British control in Asia. As early as November 1812, the Advocate General of Fort St. George observed:

the temporary removal of a native, with his family and slaves, in the ordinary course of business, from Bombay to the coast of Malabar, from either of these places to Ceylon, from Ceylon to the coast of Coromandel, or from hence to Bengal, or Penang, would now incur the penalties of felony ... it seems clear, that if a merchant of Malabar goes over to the opposite islands, or if a Moliar⁸³ of the coast of Coromandel pursues the accustomed traffic to Acheen and Pegue in a vessel navigated by his slaves, his return with them to the British territories to be therein dealt with as slaves, is felony under the letter of the statute.⁸⁴

⁸² Gwyn Campbell also makes this point in: Campbell, "Servitude and the changing face of the demand for labor in the Indian Ocean World, c. 1800-1900," 31. See also: Hideaki Suzuki, "Environmental knowledge and resistance by slave transporters in the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean," in *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 187-204.

⁸³ This is most likely Chuliar.

⁸⁴ PP 1828, 144.

Between January and July in 1813, the Governor General in Calcutta sought clarification from the Court of Directors over the applicability of the Slave Trade Felony Act in four possible cases.⁸⁵ First, whether the Act's provisions applied to natives of India who carried slaves by sea to ports outside the Company's control. Second, whether foreign merchants who brought slaves for sale to ports under the EIC or the British Crown could be punished under the Act. Third, whether British subjects, who did not wish to sell their slaves, could be permitted to take them onboard vessels as domestic servants. Finally, whether EIC officials should capture ships that were navigated wholly or partly by slaves.⁸⁶ The letters also urged the Directors to examine whether the 1811 Act required amendment in its applicability in India and in the 'Eastern Seas' (Southeast Asia).⁸⁷ Meanwhile, EIC officials in Calcutta instructed T.S. Raffles, the Company's administrator in Java, to implement the Act and inform the independent rulers of neighboring states about actions prohibited under the law.⁸⁸

As part of the investigation carried out during the *Mydeen Bux* incident, Madras officials sought information from administrators in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore on whether vessels from the Coromandel Coast carried children to be sold at Malay ports. J.W. Salmond, the Resident Councilor of Singapore, replied that during his earlier position as an administrator in Penang, he had noticed that the vessels from the Coromandel Coast arrived with men and boys. Some boys were represented as domestic servants of the 'most respectable of the passengers,' whereas others arrived to assist their relatives. In other cases, the boys had bound themselves to work in exchange for their passage to Penang. Salmond noted that such agreements seldom exceeded twelve months and that the boys were free to seek other jobs upon the completion of their bond.⁸⁹ In Singapore, Salmond indicated that about 100 boys, aged between 10 and 17 years, were employed as cooks and servants to native merchants, and worked as food vendors and harbor workers.⁹⁰

In Penang, Assistant Resident W.T. Secois noted that Kling⁹¹ boys complained to officials on several occasions that their masters, to whom the boys were bound as apprentices by their parents, had mistreated them. During investigations, the boys identified their masters as 'near relatives.' The Assistant Resident reported that between

⁸⁵ Ibid., 135-136, 151-3.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 184-5, 188.

⁸⁹ TNSA, Marine Consultations, 9 June 1840, Vol. 8, 847-54.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ A term used to refer to people from South India.

3,000 to 4,000 migrants arrived in Penang from the Coromandel coast and that there were on average about four or five boys for every hundred men. The boys typically served as cooks to the wealthy Klings and worked in the boats.⁹² The presence of boys as assistants to merchants is revealed through a murder case in Penang in 1806. In the court trial, Jemaut, a witness, deposed before the court that he was a ‘slave of Cauder (the victim)’ and that he had waited upon Cauder at breakfast on the day of his murder.⁹³

The discussions among EIC officials and the correspondence with the Court of Directors reveal a desire to qualify the scope of coverage of the Slave Trade Felony Act. EIC officials did not wish to adopt measures that threatened the flow of trade to ports under their control. EIC officials’ concerns were further complicated by the fact that issues relating to vessels detained by the Royal Navy could not be resolved in EIC-administered courts in India, unless they were provided Admiralty status that allowed them to prosecute such cases.⁹⁴ Moreover, there was a pervasive view in EIC circles that ‘domestic’ slavery aboard ships did not constitute slavery as defined by the Act. English officials often commented on the ‘benign’ nature of slavery in India.⁹⁵ Indrani Chatterjee has pointed to the erasure of certain slave arrangements, since colonial officials dismissed such relationships as constituting slavery. English officials also divided Indian slaves as either ‘agrestic’ or ‘domestic.’ Women and children were often considered as domestic slaves and their labor was considered as ‘unproductive,’ unlike the male slaves who worked in the fields. Chatterjee has pointed to the fallacy in such colonial-era observations, since domestic slaves performed a variety of tasks and most adult slaves entered slavery as child slaves, but this belief nevertheless contributed to the uneven implementation of the Act.⁹⁶

Finally, the Act’s uneven implementation in relation to children could also be attributed to prevailing notions about the use of child labor on ships. In a study on career patterns of European sailors, Jaap R. Bruijn observed that most sailors joined as boys at

⁹² TNSA, Marine Consultations, 9 June 1840, Vol. 8, 847-54.

⁹³ IOR, 22 Aug. 1806, IOR/G/34/14.

⁹⁴ The concern over the actions of the Royal Navy in detaining vessels under the Slave Trade Felony Act can be seen in the exchanges between T.S. Raffles, Lt. Governor of Java, and the Governor General in Council in Calcutta. *Slavery in India*, 1828, 151-2, 184-5, 188.

⁹⁵ See: Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843*.

⁹⁶ Indrani Chatterjee, “Abolition by denial: The South Asian example,” in *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London: Routledge, 2005), 150-68; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). See, in particular, Chapter 5 for a detailed examination of the EIC’s policy towards slavery. For an extended discussion of the issue of slavery across time and space in South Asia, see the extremely useful collection of articles in: Indrani Chatterjee & Richard Eaton, eds. *Slavery & South Asian History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

the age of eleven or twelve.⁹⁷ In the British marine apprenticeship program, which served as a training program for thousands of British sailors, the apprentices were between twelve and seventeen years of age, with the average age being fourteen.⁹⁸ Caroline Withall has indicated that some boys were under twelve years and that the EIC was the ‘single most important employer for the [Marine] Society accounting for 9% of all merchant bindings [in the apprenticeship program].’⁹⁹ The wage structure used by the Dutch VOC in Asia shows that able-bodied Europeans were paid nine guilders, younger and inexperienced sailors were given seven guilders, and boys were paid five guilders, which indicates the use of children and their relationship to skilled and inexperienced sailors.¹⁰⁰ A report prepared for the Dutch VOC by the end of the seventeenth century noted the presence of boys as young as thirteen or fourteen on ships from Europe to Asia.¹⁰¹ Therefore, EIC officials did not understand the presence of children on ships in the Indian Ocean World as an anomaly.

While children could be found on ships, the ‘normal’ age at which they could be brought on board is less clear. This lack of clarity was a consequence arising from cultural variations in defining children and the changing understandings of childhood. From the mid-nineteenth century, clearer distinctions emerged in Europe between childhood, adolescence, and youth as discrete phases. But such definitions were not always clear cut and slippages occurred, thereby showing that age categories were unstable.¹⁰² Coinciding with developments in Europe, from the mid-nineteenth century several efforts were made in India to define age standards for a variety of purposes. This information provides us with some understanding of the ideas of European officials regarding the working ages of non-European children. Satadru Sen notes that in the 1860s, the colonial government, confronted with the issue of supporting children who lost their parents due to famine, used eighteen years as the dividing age between a child and an adult. In the twentieth century, the government Jails Committee considered those under fourteen years as children and

⁹⁷ Jaap R. Bruijn, “Career patterns,” in *Those Emblems of Hell: European sailors and the maritime labour market, 1570-1870*, eds. Paul C. van Royen, Jaap R. Buijn, and Jan Lucassen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 25-34.

⁹⁸ V.C. Burton, “Apprenticeship regulation and maritime labour in the 19th century,” *International Journal of Maritime History*, 1, 1 (June 1989), 29-49; Dianne Payne, “Child labour in eighteenth century London,” *Historian*, 100 (2008), 22-5.

⁹⁹ Withall, “The forgotten boys of the sea,” 4, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Matthias van Rossum, Lex Heerma van Voss, Jelle van Lottum, and Jan Lucassen, “National and international labour market for sailors in European, Atlantic and Asian waters, 1600-1850,” in *Maritime History as Global History*, eds. Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 68.

¹⁰¹ Matthias van Rossum, “A ‘Moorish World’ within the Company: The VOC, maritime logistics and subaltern networks of Asian sailors,” *Itinerario*, XXXVI, 3 (2012), 43.

¹⁰² David M. Pomfret, *Youth and Empire: Trans-colonial childhoods in British and French Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 5.

persons between fourteen and sixteen years as young persons.¹⁰³ The 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA), which sought to regulate the minimum age of marriage in India, identified a male child as a person below eighteen years and a female child as below fourteen years.¹⁰⁴ In 1876, the age for considering a person as a legal major was set at eighteen.¹⁰⁵ However, the age standards for factory labor were considerably lower. Until the 1891 Factories Act, the minimum age of children who could be employed in factories was set at seven; thereafter, it was nine. This was lower than the minimum age for factory work agreed at the Berlin Labour Conference (1890), which set it at twelve, and this provision was signed by Britain. The Berlin Conference also decided on a separate minimum age of ten for factory work in southern countries. The rationale for an even more reduced minimum working age for Indian children than that of children in southern countries was based on the assumption that a nine-year old Indian child was as precocious as a ten-year old Italian child.¹⁰⁶

The details mentioned above relate to discussions that occurred between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereas the instances of actions by EIC officials relating to slave trafficking that are presented in this article took place decades earlier. Despite the gap in time, the later deliberations on defining age help us to understand the actions of EIC officials upon finding boys as crew members on ships. The discussions show that it was acceptable, in Europe and Asia, to use very young children as laborers. The fact that the age standard was quite low, even in the reformist discussions on child labor in the late-nineteenth century, suggests that very young children could have been regularly accepted as part of the labor force in earlier decades. In addition, the formulation of a separate age standard of work for Indian children shows that Europeans believed that Indian children could be made to work at a younger age than European children. Taken together, these particulars suggest that EIC officials could have tolerated the presence of Asian children on Indian Ocean ships who were younger than those found on European vessels.

¹⁰³ Satadru Sen, *Colonial Childhoods: The juvenile periphery of India, 1850-1945* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 67-8.

¹⁰⁴ Ishita Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age: Child marriage in India, 1891-1937* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-8.

CONCLUSION

The article has examined three issues related to child maritime labor: procurement of children, tasks performed by children on ships, and the actions of EIC officials in applying anti-slavery laws in instances of child trafficking or child workers on ships. The article described the various pathways by which children were brought on board a ship. They could be acquired by the ship's crewmembers or recruited by the *ghat syrangis*, the labor contractors who operated in ports and were often used to recruit adult seamen. Some children were sold or handed over by their parents or relatives. In certain instances, children passed through several intermediaries before they landed on a vessel. Some children accompanied their masters on a ship. Some were deceived or coerced to work on a ship. In some cases, children willingly went with the people who took them, although the true extent of their choice should be weighed against their age and prevailing conditions of distress. The cases also reveal that children could be incorporated into the families of merchants, shipowners, and crewmembers. In the event a child remained with his or her adopted family into adulthood, the social and economic relationship between the person and the owner might undergo some change in the continuum between slavery and freedom.

The details of the cases of children found on ships or in ports allow us to identify some broad categories of tasks performed by them as maritime laborers. First, children were used as crew members and assigned menial roles, such as that of cooking, operating fans, emptying water, and scrubbing decks. It is possible that boys assumed other skilled positions as they became older and capable of performing navigation tasks that required strength, dexterity, and physical maturity. Boys associated with a ship might have worked in the docks in repairing vessels or in loading and unloading cargo. Second, children accompanied their masters on a ship as domestic servants. In this role, the children continued to perform their onshore duties of attending upon their owners. Their labor in this context represents an extension of 'domestic work' outside the home. Relatedly, children worked as domestic servants to the ship's crew, typically the captain or the *nakhuda*. While most of the children working on ships were boys, girls could be found on board as domestic servants, either for the passengers or the ship's crewmembers. Under such conditions of employment, girls as well as boys faced the risk of sexual exploitation.

The details of the cases discussed in the article are drawn from the reports or discussions of the East India Company officials on the issue of slavery in India. The Company records reveal a desire among some EIC officials to take action against slave

trade and slavery. At the same time, the discussions also display the reluctance and ambivalence among EIC administrators to enforce legislation regarding slave trade. EIC officials simply allowed children to continue to work in their existing arrangement, since they were not deemed as constituting slavery. In addition, EIC officials did not consider the use of children as maritime workers as unusual since European vessels also employed children in multiple capacities. There was also a lack of clarity on defining working age limits for children. These factors led to a persistence of the use of children as maritime laborers, mostly under conditions of slavery, despite the presence of anti-slave trade and anti-slavery laws.

While recognizing the growing amount of scholarship on Asian sailors, this article has pointed to the importance of examining the participation of children in the maritime labor market in the Indian Ocean World. Based on the cases discussed in the article, it is possible to draw some comparisons between adult and child maritime workers. In recruiting sailors at ports, *ghat syrang*s were used to procure both adult and child sailors. While the terms of hiring for adults followed some standard procedures, the recruitment of children was influenced more by the scruples of the *ghat syrang*s and others involved in finding labor for ships. This meant that the wage rate and frequency of payment were arbitrarily decided for child sailors. In addition, deception and coercion were often used to procure children. While in some cases children in distress appear to have accompanied persons who promised them food and clothing, several cases reveal varying degrees of subterfuge in luring children. In terms of onboard tasks, both adults and children performed several menial tasks. Adult *lascars* mainly took orders from the *syrang* (headman) on board the vessel. However, children might receive orders from multiple sources of authority because of their ‘child’ status. Finally, scholarship on adult *lascars* has described the perils for these seamen who went to Britain as sailors and could not be employed as sailors on the return voyages due to Britain’s Navigations Acts, which largely prevented using *lascars* on British vessels. In the case of child sailors, dangers were higher, since the risks of being sold into slavery or transferred to another person were ever present, even if a child began a voyage as a ‘free’ individual.