

Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry 1908–1951

Touraj Atabaki

INTRODUCTION

The course of history in the Persian Gulf, an area rich in spatial networks, commercial associations, and traffic of ideas, was decisively altered by the arrival of British colonialism. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British had turned the Persian Gulf into a “British Lake.” In the early period of expansion of British hegemony, Indian subjects of the Empire landed in Persia as soldiers, with rifles in hand. However, by the discovery of oil in southern Persia in 1908, Indian skilled and semiskilled workers outnumbered Indian soldiers.

Following the discovery of oil, a massive construction effort was needed to mine, process, and transport the mineral to the world market. Access roads, pipelines, an oil refinery, and shipping docks had to be built. The immediate problem, which the oil business then struck, was the scarcity of skilled and semiskilled labors within Persia/Iran. The unprecedented scale and novelty of the project demanded a grand recruitment drive to find suitable workers, from Mesopotamia to South Asia. While unskilled labor

T. Atabaki (✉)

International Institute for Social History, Royal Netherlands
Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Fig. 1 Oil fields and refinery 1928.

could be supplied by local tribal pastoralist and village-based laboring poor, the skilled and semiskilled workforce was recruited from as far away as India and Burma. The recruitment of workers from India by the oil industry continued for more than 40 years. Indian migrant workers formed their own social and residential communities in the major Iranian oil towns, and constituted a distinctive and significant labor cluster in the industry until the mid-twentieth century.

The historiography of Indian migration beyond British colonial frontiers certainly provides perspectives on the established history of labor in India. Pioneer researchers of trans-ocean Indian indentured labor migration have published extensively on the Indian migrant workers who embarked for Africa and the Americas. Among the many publications about these types and routes of Indian migration, the classic works of Gillion, Lal, Emmer, Carter, and Mohapatra should be mentioned.¹ Singha and Tetzlaff have studied Indian indentured labor in Mesopotamia and the northern Persian Gulf; Seccombe and Lawless examined the migration of Indian labor to the Arabian Peninsula at the south end of the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, the life and times of Indian workers who migrated to West Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Persia/Iran in the era of British colonial rule have only rarely been described.²

DEPARTING FOR PERSIA

In December 1907, 20 Indian cavalymen landed at the port of Mohammareh (Khoramshahr) on the waterway to the Persian Gulf. Their mission, as outlined by the British Consul in Mohammareh, was to guard the expeditionary operations of the Burma Oil Company. The company was engaged in oil exploration in the south of Khuzestan, a Persian province.³ Oil was discovered at Masjed Suleiman in Southwest Persia/Iran 5 months later. The use of Indian cavalymen by the young Persian/Iranian oil industry was a precursor to decades of employment of Indian skilled and semiskilled artisans and clerical workers. The era of Indian employment ended in 1951, after the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran and subsequent changeover in management when the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company⁴ became an international consortium.

In 1901, William N. D'Arcy, an Australian entrepreneur supported by the British legation in Tehran, obtained a remarkable concession in Persia, which gave him monopoly rights to "search for, obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable trade, carry away, and sell natural gas, petroleum" and all

Table 1 Employment in the Anglo-Persian/Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1910–1950.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Iranian</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>European</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
1910	1362	158	40	146	1706
1915	2203	979	80	187	3449
1920	8447	3616	244	35	12,342
1925	15,820	4890	994	7201	28,905
1930	20,095	2411	1191	7549	31,246
1935	25,240	954	1035	119	27,348
1940	26,484	1158	1056	15	28,713
1945	60,366	2498	2357	240	65,461
1950	72,681	1744	2725	34	77,184

Sources R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 1, The Developing Years 1901–1932* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J.H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 2, The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

the derivatives “throughout the whole extent of the Persian Empire.” Article 12 of his agreement stated that “the workmen employed in the service of the Company shall be subject to His Imperial Majesty the Shah, except the technical staff, such as the managers, engineers, borers, and foremen.”⁵ After the first oil flares and the expansion of drilling operations, access roads were built, pipes were laid to bring oil to the Persian Gulf, and the Abadan Refinery was constructed. At that time, the recruitment of unskilled, semiskilled, and unskilled labors for the industry was poorly regulated. Unskilled labor was chiefly recruited from Bakhtiyari peasants and pastoral nomads living in the region adjacent to the oilfield. Indian migrant workers comprised the main trunk of the semiskilled and skilled workforce⁶ (Table 1).

The number of Indian migrant workers grew from 157 in 1910 (representing about 9% of a total workforce of 1706 at that time) to a peak of 4890 workers in 1925 (about 16% of a total workforce of 28,905).

The early cluster of Indian migrant workers who joined the Persian oil industry was either recruited through an intermediary agency in India, or transferred directly from the Rangoon Refinery through the coordination of the Burma Oil Company, which had a large stake in the D’Arcy concession.⁷

In the early years of its operation, the oil company was mainly concerned with establishing the basic infrastructure required to supply oil to the

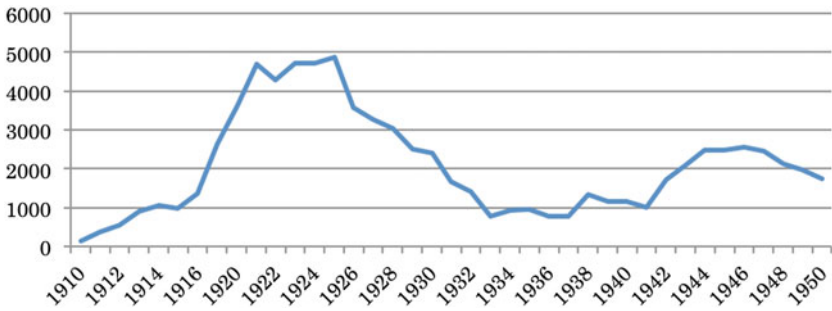


Fig. 2 Indian employment in the Anglo-Persian/Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1910–1950. Sources R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 1, The Developing Years 1901–1932* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J.H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 2, The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

market. Training facilities for local labor were, therefore, not on its list of priorities. At this initial stage, the recruitment and employment policy of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) aimed to overcome the scarcity of skilled and semiskilled labors by employing large numbers of migrant workers, mostly from India, both in clerical and skilled or semiskilled manual professions.⁸ As I will show in this essay, this policy changed when the industry grew bigger. Employing labor came to be influenced by political factors—both at the top, through the tripartite relations of APOC, the Government of India, and the Persian government, and from below, through labor activism aimed at improving the situation of workers.

In India, the British Indian trading company Shaw Wallace & Co. Ltd was the intermediary agent recruiting labor for Persia, with Strick, Scott & Co., as its representative in Persia. “With the flotation of the APOC, work in the Bombay office increased rapidly as equipment of every conceivable kind had to be forwarded to the [Persian] Gulf, where Mohammareh was then the base office, and not only for equipment but the clerk staff as well as household domestics and servants for the office.”⁹ Shaw Wallace worked closely with the Burma Oil Company and APOC, and its mission as labor recruitment agency lasted until 1926, when APOC decided to take over the task and recruit Indian labor via its office in Bombay. In India, Shaw Wallace was the sole agent of these oil companies, providing various services in addition to labor recruitment.



Fig. 3 Construction of the Gach-qaraguli (Gachsaran) Road, 1909. *Source* British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

Charles Greenway, who originally worked in the oil department of Shaw Wallace as agent of the Burma Oil Company in India, later joined the Persian oil industry in 1910 as Managing Director and became Chairman of APOC in 1914–1927.¹⁰

The majority of migrant workers recruited to the Persian oil industry from Burma were Indians employed by the Burma Oil Company. Their lengthy experience of working at the Burma oilfields and the Rangoon Oil Refinery made them an attractive labor source. Using a free-contract system, Shaw Wallace arranged for the passage of these workers from Burma to Persia. They were mainly Chittagonian Sunni Muslims, who had joined the Burmese oil industry in the 1890s.¹¹ In the APOC administrative records or British colonial archives, the social, territorial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds of Indian migrant workers were never separately identified. The same applied to Iranian workers. Thus, all migrant workers from India employed by the Persian oil industry were simply classified as “Indians.” However, by collating data found in the national archives of

India, Iran, and Britain, sources in the APOC and British Petroleum company archives, and records from the community of Indian migrant workers living in Iran, some additional distinctions can be made. In Persia, workers originating from Burma were, for example, categorized as *Rangoony* (from Rangoon), so distinguishing them from other Indian migrants. In the city of Abadan, the Rangoony community had its own mosque, segregated from other Indian Sunni and Shiites Muslims. It was known as the “Rangoony Mosque,” no doubt a reference to a substantial Burmese population in Abadan.

Shaw Wallace recruited not only Indian migrant workers from Burma to work in the Persian oil industry. Through subsidiary or subcontractors’ offices, it also recruited both skilled and semiskilled workers in Bombay and Karachi. Subcontractors like I.A. Ashton & Sons and Bullock Brothers were specialized in recruiting fitters, oil and diesel engine drivers, marine signalmen, marine raters, boilermakers, pipe fitters, etc.¹² Recruiters often advertised in Bombay papers, especially for clerical employment. However, there are also references stating that intermediaries such as I.A. Ashton posted notices, posters, and wallpapers in the Punjab.¹³ All workers who applied for the announced positions first had to go through a qualifications examination. Those recruited in Punjab were interviewed in Lahore, and Bombay recruits were interviewed in Mazagaon Dock Bombay, before joining the mass of employees departing for Persia. The intermediary companies charged each new recruit 25% of their first month’s pay. Those who had previously worked for the oil company in Persia and returned to India in less than 2 years were required to pay an admission fee of 10 rupees.¹⁴ The same rule applied to workers hired for household and domestic services, such as butlers, cooks, domestic servants, hospital ward orderlies, and sweepers (these were chiefly recruited by Osborn & Co., affiliated to the Parsee enterprise based in Bombay).¹⁵

With the founding of Abadan Refinery in 1909, the number of Indian migrant workers steadily increased. By 1913, there were 1000 clerical and manual employees. However, around the time that the First World War broke out in 1914, there were two new developments, which had a big effect on the recruitment of labor from India. First, the British admiralty decided to convert all its marine steam engines (industrial, army, and naval units) from coal to oil fuels, a transition that had already begun in 1912.¹⁶ Within a few years, that made oil a crucial economic resource for British interests around the world, causing the oil industry to boom. Second, the British government decided to raise its shareholding in APOC to 51%, and

thereby became the major owner of the company.¹⁷ A generous preferential contract was signed in 1914, under which the British admiralty could purchase Persian oil from APOC for the Royal Navy at a fixed price for 30 years. Oil suddenly became a strategic military commodity in the British Empire.¹⁸

As the Persian oil industry expanded its operations during the First World War, the need for an adequate and constant supply of labor became urgent. Unsurprisingly, the whole question of how to allocate and maintain the workforce became a priority in APOC policy, and the British Raj itself became directly involved in administering the migration of Indian workers to the oil industry. APOC claimed that the biggest obstacle in obtaining labor for the Persian oil industry was a formality in the *Indian Emigrations Act* of 1883, which restricted labor migration to specified destinations, which did not include Persia.¹⁹ In March 1915, the APOC Board proposed to the Government of India that restrictions imposed by the Act should be waived, so that APOC could recruit more skilled labor:

Owing to the non-existence of such [skilled] labor in Persia, and the impossibility of training Persians in sufficient number for their requirements, the Company is compelled to indent largely on Indian for skilled laborers of many kinds, such as riveters, engine drivers, assembling machine men, iron and brass moulders, solders, core makers, and others. Now, the number of Indian employees in Abadan and the oil fields is about 1020. It is found nevertheless that it is very difficult to induce men of these classes to leave Bombay, Rangoon, Karachi, or the other ports where they are recruited and to accept employment in Persia. Indian Emigration Act, which are unduly magnified in their imagination, and consequently act as a serious deterrent to their taking the service offered.²⁰

To strengthen its argument, APOC noted its special status as a British company in which the British government had acquired a major shareholding, providing “full power of control and of British Indian subjects being under the jurisdiction of His Majesty’s Consul.” APOC, therefore, petitioned the Government of India to apply the same emigration rule to Persia that was used for Ceylon and the Straits Settlement. According to APOC, the administrative power of the Government of India should be extended to new territory:

... under the provisions of the Persian Coast and Islands Order of 1907, British Indian subject in the Persian littoral is entirely under the jurisdiction of the Consul-General and Political Resident and his subordinate officers. British Indian law is in force and under the provision of the Order, the Indian Code of Criminal and Civil Procedure have effect '*as if the Persian Coast and Islands were a neighbourhood in the province of Bombay*'. In these circumstances, the position of Indian emigrants in the Gulf approximates to their position in Ceylon and the Straits Settlements, which are expressly exempted from the operation of the Emigration Act, and the object of this letter is to enquire whether a similar exemption cannot be accorded to the areas occupied by the Company's Work at Abadan, Mohammareh, and the Oilfields.²¹

The Persian Coast and Islands Order of 1907 referred to in APOC's petition was an appendix of the Anglo-Russian Convention signed in August 1907 in St. Petersburg. This convention aimed to consolidate in international relations various political changes that had occurred in the Far East, the Middle East, and Europe after the Russo-Japanese war and the Russian revolution of 1905. Since 1903, the territorial sovereignty of Persia had been recognized by both Russia and Britain, except for the Persian Gulf, which was considered as a "British lake." However, the 1907 Convention in substance rejected Persia as a sovereign territory, although formally it was still regarded as a sovereign state. The core of the Convention was its first section, which created Russian and British territorial spheres in north and south Persia, while leaving the central part as a buffer zone between the two imperial powers.²²

In April 1915, the Department of Commerce and Industry of the Government of India reacted to APOC's petition in the following terms:

The Government of India is very reluctant to extend the exemption to other countries. The conditions mentioned above do not apply to the Persian Gulf. Emigration of artisans to the Persian Gulf is of very recent date and living very expensive. It is possible that an account of these reasons that artisans are unwilling to proceed to the Persian Gulf even on the high Burma rates and not because of the restriction imposed by the Emigration Act. The artisan class is not so ignorant as the ordinary coolie class and is not likely to be frightened by requirements of the Act, which are not of harassing nature.²³

However, the Government of India did not completely close the door to further negotiations with APOC, and in the same memorandum, it was

considered that if “His Majesty’s Government would consent to be a party to the agreement,” and then, it would consider the desirability of an exemption, provided that “the Governments of Bombay, Punjab—where the emigrant proceed mostly from there—United Province, Bengal, and Bihar and Orissa [were] consulted.”²⁴

The dispute between APOC and the Government of India about whether Persia should be a legal destination for Indian labor migrants was not settled until February 1918. At that time, the Government of India finally agreed to a temporary suspension of the Emigration Act restrictions for territories under the APOC aegis. However, it had already realized the strategic importance of oil supply, and during the war, it had, therefore, extended the scope of its cooperation with APOC, so that oil production would not be hindered by labor scarcity.²⁵ APOC remained very insistent about the importance of a continuing labor supply from India. If that labor supply was cut off or temporarily strained, this posed a risk. When Indian workers deserted their job with the oil company in search of better pay in the British military, a manager commented:

A large number of Sikh fitters are pressing to get leave to return to their country, and a number of them have worked here at least a year. We cannot very well force them to remain as they are not under agreement, and their chief grievance is one of money.

I have no doubt that some of the men wish to go to India, than return for work in Basra, and by this way evades the Force Routine Order of 4th April. Others again will, no doubt, apply in India to Shaw Wallace and Co. for work either at the Gunboats or the I.O. Barges, as they will thus get much higher wages than that we can offer. Regarding the fitters who wish to go to their country, I have had a talk with the Head Fitter Mastery, and he tells me that some of his men here are writing to their friends in Lahore, Amritsar etc., telling them not to apply for work in this Company owing to the troubles caused by the war, dearness of living, and coercive methods that they say that we use in order to retain their services.²⁶

APOC’s concern was “fully appreciated” by the army when “a special order was issued to effect that no labor *ex* Abadan to be employed by any Military or Naval unit.”²⁷

During the war, APOC was not only troubled by the problem of skilled workers deserting the Persian oil industry; the scarcity of the supply of unskilled labor was also a hurdle for the company. During the war, there

were several factors to be reckoned with. There was anti-British tribal strife in Persia. There were famines and epidemics, which caused massive dislocation of the population in the region,²⁸ at least in the early stage of the war. The proximity of the oilfields and refinery to the war front also caused local unskilled labor to leave the oil company. As British forces advanced in Mesopotamia, and were active on the Baghdad front, a new labor market with more favorable working conditions emerged, attracting not only local skilled and unskilled workers, but also migrant workers from other regions, including India:

We have, all along, been having the greatest difficulty in retaining coolies at Abadan, [and]. ... I regret to say that matters have got very much worse during the last fortnight, and we are now nearly a thousand Coolies under strength. ... Last payday (6 days ago), some 200 men cleared off, and this morning, Abadan has rung up to say that a similar number went yesterday. ... I suppose that it is the fall of Baghdad, which it so some extent responsible for this sudden extra demand for Coolies by the [British] government.²⁹

Adding coolies to the list of their preferred recruits was a new chapter in APOC's labor policy. The Indian Labor Corps was invited to join their workforce in Persia.³⁰ In October 1917, when APOC had already accommodated a 300-strong Indian Labor Corps in Abadan, the oil company petitioned the Government of India to increase the total number of men to 800:

We understand that Persian coolies are available and will accept some with very many thanks but if it was possible our existing Indian Corps to be increased, we imagine that it would save having two separate organizations.³¹

The response of the Government of India to APOC's petition was not favorable. About 7 months earlier, on March 12, 1917, the Government had already suspended all unskilled labor migration from India, except to Ceylon and Malaysia.³²

Nevertheless, recruitment of migrant labor from India continued and even increased significantly—despite the problem of desertions by workers in pursuit of better pay, or the restrictions of the Emigration Act, which remained in force during the war. By the end of the war, the enlarged army of Indian migrants at work in the Persian oil industry was sourced from all across India. Chittagonian workers worked in harbor engineering and naval

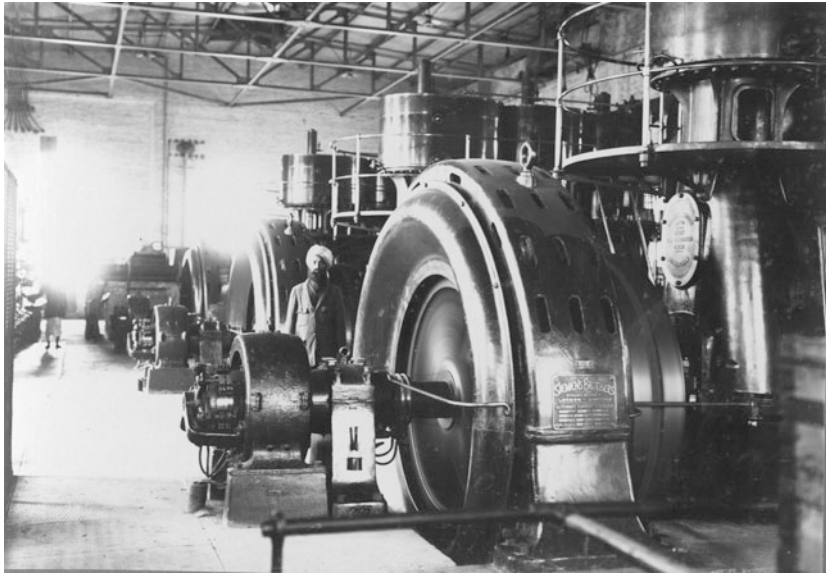


Fig. 4 Power Station, Abadan Refinery, 1921. *Source* British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

transport, while the Punjabi Sikhs were chiefly employed as drivers, technicians, and security agents. Migrants from the Madras Presidency occupied clerical functions, the Gazars from Punjab working as dhobi (washerman), while Goans served as cooks and servants.³³

According to the signed contract, Indian migrant employees were not allowed to take their family to Persia. While this was of major concern for some workers, the oil company considered the ban on family reunion as strictly nonnegotiable, except for some high-ranking clerks. However, reports in Iranian archives state that some Indian Muslim migrant workers approached the Persian authorities to intervene on their behalf, calling on APOC to grant permission for family living arrangements. For example, one appeal—signed by “Indian Muslims working at the Persian oil industry” and presented in the autumn of 1927—petitioned the “*Shahanshab* [king of kings] of Iran as the guardian of Islam” and the “protector of people of Islam” as follows:

We are guest in your holy land and hope someday the Iranian workers replace us all. However, since some of us are young and newly married, in order to elude any non-Islamic conducts here, while we are far from our family, or our spouse who burns from such partition to be fallen into naughtiness.³⁴

The contribution of oil capitalism to shaping the course of the First World War was very significant. As I mentioned before, months before the final armistice of November 1918, the Government of India temporarily suspended the application of its Emigration Act to Persia, and liberalized migration traffic. However, this suspension was short-lived. In 1920, the Government of India reversed its policy, and once again restricted labor migration to the Persian oil industry. Two years later, in 1922, the old Emigration Act was restructured via an amendment. The amendment intended to end the practice of indentured labor, extensively practiced during the war. As I will discuss in more detail, the main reason for this change in labor policy was the gradual escalation of labor protests among Indian migrant workers.

Following the amendment to curb the Emigration Act in 1922, the maximum period of employment for migrant labor recruited by APOC was reduced from 3 years to 1 year. By reducing the contract period, the Government of India and APOC gave themselves more bargaining power in dealing with labor unrest. However, one drawback of this policy was that, with its reliance on Indian skilled and unskilled migrant labor, APOC now confronted labor shortages and increased labor costs:

The withdrawal of this concession is extremely detrimental to the interests of the Company who has been obliged to rely on India not only for unskilled but for skilled labor as none is obtainable in Persia. You will readily realise how very seriously the limitation of the agreement affects the Company seeing that Indians very often do not reach the oilfields until 6 or 8 weeks after the agreement comes into operation and should a similar period elapse before they reach India on the return journey, the Company gets only 8 or 9 months work for 12 months pay, accordingly not only are labor costs very much increased, but there are more frequent changes in the personnel which it is to be avoided as far as possible.³⁵

A new Emigration Act was introduced in 1922. Other developments in the employment policy of APOC followed. The end of wartime policy and the prohibition of the indentured labor system at first motivated APOC to become directly involved with workforce recruitment. Thus, APOC

opened its own labor recruitment office in Bombay, and began to tap the local labor market for its Persian industry. In November 1925, APOC instructed Shaw Wallace & Co. to end its labor recruitment mission for the Persian oil industry in India as of January 1926. APOC said that it expected “lowered requirements for Indian labor” by replacing Indian labor with locally trained Persians.³⁶ However, that was not the only reason for the new policy.

The “Persianization” of the workforce had been of concern to the Persian government from the time that the oil concession was granted in 1901. According to Article 12 of the D’Arcy Agreement, “the workmen employed in the service of the Company shall be subject to His Imperial Majesty the Shah, except the technical staff, such as the managers, engineers, borers, and foremen.”³⁷ However, this rule was not always followed by APOC. For example, in a 1910 letter sent by Sadiq al-Saltaneh (Oil Commissar of the Persian government) to the Persian Charge d’Affaire in London, we find a complaint that non-Persian coolies were employed by APOC.³⁸ The question of schooling Persians for the technical professions was raised only in the 1920s, during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (who came to power through a coup d’état in 1920, and was inaugurated as the new king in 1925). In 1927, the Persian Ministry of Finance called on the Ministry of Endowment and Education to promote the education of Persians for a technical career in the oil industry, by establishing technical institutes in the southern province of Khuzestan:

According to the report compiled by the Oil Company, at the present, there are 4598 non-Iranians working for the Oil Company. Although the Oil Company, according to the concession [of 1901] preserved its right to employ non-Iranian labor for its technical careers, nevertheless, all necessary measures should be made to replace the entire non-Iranian with the Iranian national.³⁹

By the late 1920s, training Persian labor in APOC workshops had become normal. Persians were instructed by Indian engineers in what today would be called “on-the-job training.” As quasi-apprentices, Persians followed training courses to become “fitters, turners, moulders, blacksmiths, carpenters, armature winders, general repair electricians, boilermakers, welders (electric and acetylene), and instrument makers.”⁴⁰

In 1933, the Persian government canceled the D’Arcy concession, and offered APOC a new agreement that was more favorable to Persia.

According to the new agreement, APOC was required to employ only Persian nationals for unskilled occupations. In hiring clerical and technical employees, Persian nationals were to be preferred, if they had the necessary competence and experience.⁴¹ Article 16 of the new 1933 Agreement—carefully worded to meet Persian employment requirements—stipulated that:

... the Company shall recruit its artisans as well as its technical and commercial staff from among Persian nationals to the extent that it shall find, in Persia, persons who possess the requisite skill and experience. It is likewise understood that the unskilled staff shall be composed exclusively of Persian nationals.

The parties declare themselves in agreement to study and prepare a general plan of yearly and progressive reduction of the non-Persian employment with a view to replacing them in the shortest possible time and progressively by Persian nationals.⁴²

The oil company was invited to advertise its job vacancies not only in the local Persian press, but also in the national press and at employment offices, in order to promote a bigger Persian workforce.⁴³ In one initiative, the oil company called on all its employees to ask their friends and relatives throughout Iran to apply for vacancies in the oil industry.⁴⁴

Taking into account the combined effect of all these developments—new employment policies, political pressure from the Iranian government, and increased labor activism (initially among Indian migrant labor, but later involving Persians)—we can better understand why the number of Indian migrant workers in the oil industry decreased considerably from the mid-1920s and in the 1930s.⁴⁵

The outbreak of the Second World War once again powerfully boosted the demand for oil. A new oil boom resulted, and the number of Indian migrant workers in the oil industry grew by 100%, reaching 2498 men in 1945. However, the Indian independence movement together with the campaign to nationalize the Iranian oil industry caused the Indian migrant labor community in Iran to dwindle. When the Iranian oil industry was nationalized in March 1951, the community of Indian migrant workers broke up. Some had worked for the fallen Anglo-Iranian Company (APIC). A large number of Indian employees decided to join the European staff, and left Iran. Some Indians opted to stay in Iran, and continued to work in the oil industry under a Persian employer.

ABADAN, A TRIPARTITE CITY

In her seminal study of colonial urbanization in Morocco, Janet Abu-Lughod refers to Rabat as a dual city, with sharply segregated urban spaces of the colonizer and the colonized.⁴⁶ However, there is often another urban space in the colonial cities, between the colonial settlers and the colonized indigenous population—a buffer zone occupied by intermediary groups. For example, in Calcutta, “British colonists deliberately cultivated a segment of the indigenous elite, who served as intermediaries between the colonizers and the colonized.”⁴⁷

When the first stone of the refinery was laid in 1910, the island of Abadan (or *‘Abbadan*, as it was spelled back then) was thinly populated by the Nassar Arabs. Their leader was the local Sheikh Khaz‘al, who lived in the nearby village Mohammareh (later Khoramshahr). The inward migration to Abadan of people seeking employment in the oil industry, or providing services to the employees of the oil industry, soon grew beyond all expectations—especially after the First World War when the global dependency on fuel oil greatly increased. APOC’s Indian employees in Abadan numbered only 80 in 1910, but gradually rose to 1028 in 1914, and then grew sharply to 3816 in 1922.⁴⁸ Thus, in two decades, Abadan grew from a modest sheikh’s village to a large company town, which by 1930 had around 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants,⁴⁹ of which about half—17,370 men—worked at the oil refinery.⁵⁰

In the warm climate of southern Persia, long working hours were normal. In the early years of the oil company, no standard working day for employees existed at all. Workers were often expected to work 7 days a week, from sunrise to sunset. Some years later, however, on the eve of the First World War, a new workday regime was implemented: 6 days were worked per week, from 9 to 12 h per day, depending on the season. Work typically started at 6 o’clock in the morning and ended at 6 o’clock in the evening during the winter, and continued from 6 o’clock in the morning until 3 o’clock in the afternoon during the summer. It was only after a series of labor protests in the 1920s that APOC eventually adopted standard working hours throughout the year, commencing at 6 in the morning and finishing officially at 5.30 in the afternoon, with an hour and a half for breakfast and an hour for lunch.⁵¹ In the early days, the oil company designated Sunday as a day off. In later years, the rest period started at noon on Thursday, and included Friday.

At first, APOC offered temporary housing exclusively to its British and European staff. Two years later, in August 1912—when the construction of the refinery was sufficiently near completion to allow a trial run to be made⁵²—APOC's European employees were accommodated in brick villas and bungalows surrounded by gardens. These houses were built at the northwestern site of the refinery known as *Braim*, where the Sheikh Khaz'al also had his residence. On the opposite side of the refinery, to the southeast and north of the old village, a new neighborhood was constructed for Indian clerks and artisans. The refinery was in fact a "buffer zone" between the Braim and the new neighborhood. During the early years, this new neighborhood was called Coolie Lane. Its name later changed to Sikh-Lane, when the majority of Indians working at the refinery were Sikhs, and finally to Indian Lane. Indian employees in the Coolie/Sikh/Indian Lane were housed in parallel long and round barracks. Each barrack was divided by wall portions into number of units. Each unit could accommodate several employees, or else a family, if by exception family members were permitted by the company to join the employee.

In the early days, Persian recruits either lived in sunbaked mud houses in the old village, around *sheikh-bazar*, or around the old town, in shelters made of loosely lashed sticks or bamboo, roofed with palm leaves.⁵³ However, during the later period, they moved to Ahmadabad, Bahmanshir, and Kofeysheh, often on their own initiative. In the early 1920s, APOC added two new neighborhoods to Abadan: the *Bowardeh* area and the Indian Quarter (*kuarter-e hendi-ha*). Bowardeh was constructed to accommodate Persian clerks and skilled workers. The Indian Quarter was intended for Indian semiskilled workers and security agents. Between the two new labor neighborhoods of Bahmanshir and Ahmadabad, the Indian Quarter featured row houses and a public toilet (new to Iranian architecture), and had its own Sunni and Shi'ite mosques as well as a home-based Hindu temple.⁵⁴ The old Indian Lane, well maintained, was for the use of Indian clerks and artisans.

As a tripartite city, Abadan was spatially divided according to the social stratification principles imposed by British colonialism. A highly stratified racial hierarchy existed, which APOC's British employees brought with them from home and from India. The city was divided between Europeans at the top, Indians in the middle, and native Persians at the bottom. This racial partition was consistently observed, even when new neighborhoods

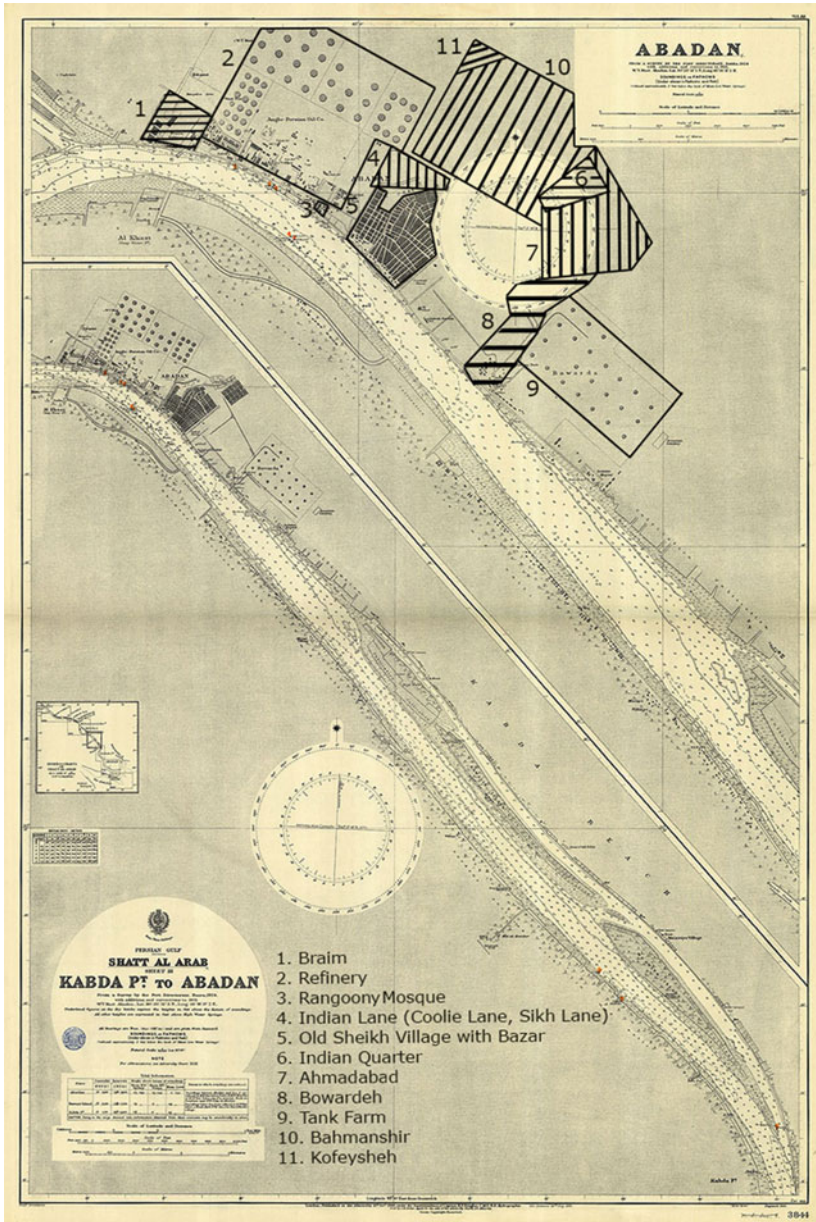


Fig. 5 Map of Abadan in 1926, showing the new suburbs built in the 1920s and 1930s. Source British Library. Location of new suburbs added by the author.

were added to the city, as the oil industry expanded, the refinery was extended, and the employment policy was altered.⁵⁵

Crossing this very rigid racial partition was possible when higher ranking Indians (and, later, Persians) were invited to attend official ceremonies, congregations, or worship services with the European community.⁵⁶ However, mixing across racial borders was “specifically discouraged, and segregation was held up as the best alternative.”⁵⁷ The APOC archive contains a 1926 memorandum signed by Armstrong, an APOC executive in Abadan, which illustrates this segregation. According to the memorandum, when some Indian clerks at APOC approached Armstrong in Abadan to get permission to use the library, he was reluctant to respond positively to their demands, because he was worried that if he granted access to Indian clerks, this might cause Europeans to avoid the library. Consequently, he advised Indians to create their own library with old and used books from the European library.⁵⁸

In colonial culture, racial segregation had a domino effect. In Abadan, it was not just Indian employees who were supposed to have their own community library. The “native” Persians were also barred from using the Indian Library and encouraged to have their own. This ethnic partition extended to other services, such as health and sports facilities. The Europeans had their own exclusive hospitals and sports clubs, separate from Indians and Persians, with different quality standards.⁵⁹ APOC justified its policy and actions by arguing that:

Under European guidance, Persians were learning to separate themselves from fellow Indian workers. Separate Persian clubs would serve the dual purpose of stilling complaints in Tehran and keeping labor divided in Khuzestan.⁶⁰

LABOR ACTIVISM ENCOUNTERS NATIONALISM

The dialectics between nationalism and labor movements during colonial rule in Asia and Africa have been the subject of a few major studies.⁶¹ Increasingly, large-scale labor migrations became a feature of imperial social formations. As anticolonial nationalism gathered steam, there were more and more cases of backlash against migrant workers, including among labor activists and labor movements inspired by nationalist ideas. In many instances, transnational migrant laborers were perceived as invidious

guests, who were there at the courtesy of patronage by the colonial power, in order to weaken the colonized, or aid their further exploitation. The oil towns of Persia were founded as migrant towns. They accommodated large groups of migrant labors coming from different parts of Persia, as well as colonial subjects from the Indian subcontinent. For APOC, all Iranian workers were classified as “Persians,” irrespective of their provincial origin, and they were generally treated as third-class employees. The migrant workers from the Indian subcontinent were considered as the second-class employees and treated accordingly. In the Persian oil industry, the social stratification scheme imposed by British colonial rule contributed to creating nationalist sentiments, both among Indian migrant workers and among the “native” Persians.⁶²

There is no reference in APOC records to any major labor discontent or mass protests in the oil industry during its early years. Nevertheless, the oil company’s operations were not always running smoothly. Many skirmishes and clashes occurred between abusive European foremen and disgruntled workers.⁶³ In the early years of the oil industry, these frictions were negotiated via foremen. Casual workers did not agitate for self-organization as a class of employees. All these changed after the First World War. In December 1920, some 3000 Indian workers of the Abadan Oil Refinery staged a strike. Their demands included an increase in wages, a reduction of daily working hours, additional pay for overtime, improvement of sanitary conditions, and an end to vilification and molestation of workers by staff members.⁶⁴ They were soon joined by their Iranian coworkers, which forced the refinery authorities to accept some of the demands of the workers. This turn of events was of great concern among APOC directors. They feared the radicalization of their skilled Indian workers and the infection of unskilled Iranians by “subversive ideas.” In addition to workers’ fury over “conditions and cost of living,” the British Petroleum historian Ronald Ferrier refers to the 1920 strike as “a consequence of the bitter resentment in India, following the Amritsar massacre riot of April 1919,” and says that it was provoked by some Indian “semi-organized” political agitators.⁶⁵

More recently, other historians have also regarded the Amritsar massacre as the cause of the 1920 Indian workers’ strike.⁶⁶ However, it is doubtful that the Abadan strike of December 1920 can be associated with a massacre, which occurred more than a year and half earlier. Such an interpretation downgrades the extremely deprived living conditions and low wages of workers in the oil industry, or arises from a colonial reading of the

past. The 80% salary increase demanded by workers illustrates how poorly paid both Indian and Persian workers actually were. The petitions by Persian workers, which were sent to the government in Tehran, all refer to “poor pay, inadequate facilities, dirty living conditions, and the lack of compensation in case of disability.”⁶⁷

Although, in the end, APOC’s attempt at reconciliation did concede the strikers’ demand for wage increases, it did not go beyond that. It left other workers’ petitions unrequited. Other workers’ demands had concerned “accommodation, married square, medical services, leisure amenities, exchange rate, and the sale of discharge certificates of Indian employees.”⁶⁸ It was, therefore, to be expected that workers’ discontent would flare up again. Therefore, it did, 18 months later. In May 1922, another strike of Indian workers broke out, which was soon joined by Persian workers. George Thomson, an employee of APOC, recalled the strike as a “well-organized” protest, by “the skilled artisans, involving about 2000 Indians.”⁶⁹ Thomson does not probe the roots of this strike. However, one of the Indian employees of APOC, named Mudliar in an “eyewitness account,” described, in detail, the poor working and living conditions of Indians in APOC. The account of Mudliar followed an early statement by Dr. Ghore in the *Bombay Chronicle* under the title of “Indian Workers in Persia, Miserable Condition.” According to Ghore’s statement:

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company Limited alone employed 95% Indians. There is no restriction in the number of hours worked everyday. Neither coal nor ice was supplied to workers until agitation was started. Workers die of sunstroke in summer and pneumonia in winter as a little is done to look to their wants and comforts. I request Indian labor to take up the cause of their comrades in Persia particularly those employed by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, whose agents are the Shaw Wallace & Co., Bombay.⁷⁰

Following Dr. Ghore statement, Mudliar narrates his personal experience of working for APOC, where “large numbers of workers of all classes skilled and unskilled are brought up as fast as steamers and trains can carry them, without the slightest care being given to them on board the ship causing untold suffering on the way. From Mohammareh, batches of men are sent up to the oilfields in steamers on open deck, through second-class passengers, to suffer in the biting cold and chill weather of the cruel Persian winter.” On arrival, “they are not given any accommodation in such a dreary place as this, and even if any is given, it is without latrine, without

cookhouse.” Mudliar testified as “there is no certainty of working hours, which are sometimes as long as 10 and 12 h in a day in all weathers.” The working environment, according to Mudliar, was nothing but “humiliating” and “unbearable.” He confirmed Dr. Ghore’s reference to “men dying of sunstroke and pneumonia” as true.⁷¹

In Mudliar’s testimony, there is also reference to extremely poor living conditions for Indian workers:

Living accommodation provided is inadequate and a large number of people are huddled tighter in small room, incompletely furnished, by way of furniture and lights, nothing to say of cookhouses and latrines, thus making life extremely hard.⁷²

Added to these “unbearable” working and living conditions were the steady increase of the prices of essential commodities and high living costs. According to Mudliar, prices were as a rule high and were “on the increase daily,” making it “impossible” for Indian workers to “command even the necessaries of life” in Persia, let alone “to support their dependents in India.”⁷³

APOC responded through the British Consul in Mohammareh by characterizing all the public allegations of Dr. Ghore and Mudliar as “groundless fabrication” intended only to justify a salary increase.⁷⁴ When the 1922 strike broke out, APOC immediately called on Sheikh Khaz‘al to “deal with the native” employees, while “after careful consideration,” the company decided that the “only course open was to repatriate nearly 2000 skilled Indian workmen.”⁷⁵ When the strike leaders refused to board the ship, unless all strikers could leave Persia at once, APOC reluctantly conceded their demand. In doing so, the company lost a large part of its skilled workforce, the majority of them being Sikhs, although “Indian clerical staff, orderlies, process staff, and cooks were still employed.”⁷⁶

Later, in 1924, the British Legation in the Persian Gulf reported the activity of an Indian mechanic in Masjed Suleiman, named Muhammad Khan, who tried to form a workers’ union.⁷⁷ However, the May 1922 strike is the last known collective action by Indian migrant workers in the Persian oil industry. Because Indian employees were thereafter gradually replaced with Persians, the position of the remaining Indian workforce was weakened.

The Iranization of the workforce accelerated after 1920–1922 strikes and paved the way for the gradual reduction of Indian labor.⁷⁸ This

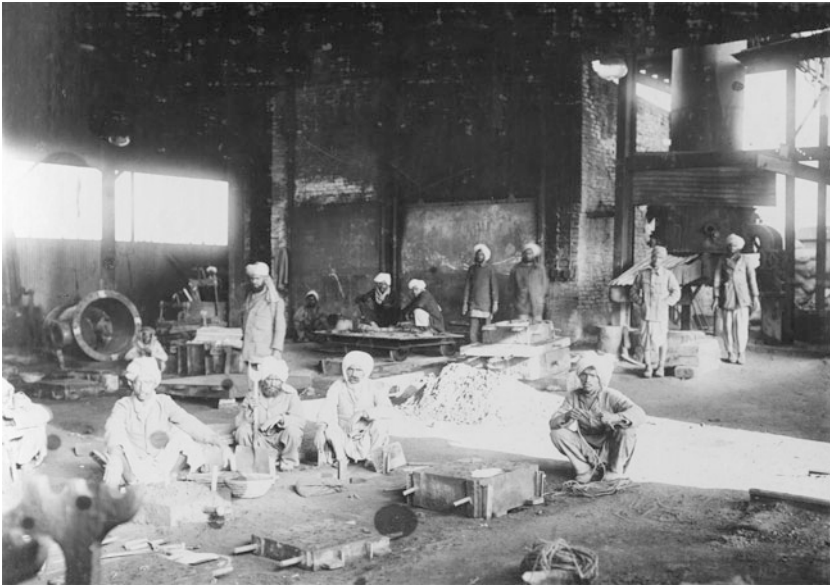


Fig. 6 Foundry, Abadan, 1921. *Source* British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

development went hand in hand with the rise of Persian territorial-state nationalism stimulated by the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909) and the emergence of a new political society after the First World War, supported by new institutions intending to create a modern centralized state. Along with the consolidation of such a political society, there was also the reemergence of a new anticolonial nationalism, supported by noncoercive institutions, such as political parties, guilds and labor unions, cultural associations, and private schools.

With the making of the workers in the oil industry, organized and non-organized Iranian workers began to engage in mass activities. Not only did they demand better working and living conditions, but also wanted recognition of their autonomous status as citizens of the country. On May 1, 1929 (International Labor Day), when about 9000 workers at the Abadan Refinery launched a mass strike, their demands included an increase in wages by 15%; recognition of the workers' union and May Day as a legitimate holiday; reduction of the working day from 10 to 7 h in the summer, and to 8 h in the winter; and complete equality between Indian and

Iranian employees.⁷⁹ The strike was initiated mainly by Iranian workers, and Indians workers did not participate in it. Indeed, protected by the company's security guards, a group of "Rangoony workers" unsuccessfully tried to cross the picket line and proceed to the refinery.⁸⁰

APOC claimed that the strike of May 1929 was nothing but a "Bolshevik plot," to "foment intense labor trouble" in the oil industry and "ultimately ablaze in the southern Persian."⁸¹ However, the national press accused the oil company of downplaying the true cause of the labor discontent:

There seems to be two factors for the strike among the workmen of the Company; first, the times have changed and workmen in all parts think more of their personal comfort than they did formally desiring easier work and more wages, particularly as individual and social expenses have now naturally been greatly increased. ... Second, [it is] the bad treatment by Company officials of the Persian workmen. It is true that the workmen are not educated, but still they have human sense and natural intelligence and they notice that the Company favours the Indian and the Iraqis and treats them better. ... We can assure the Company' authorities that should they change their treatment of the Persians and treat them as to the Indian and Iraqis and rank them on the same level of pay, then the Persian element would never create trouble, and as they pay no attention to the Bolshevik propaganda.⁸²

The issue of inequality between Indians and Persian workers was raised many times from the early years of APOC operation onward. In the petitions sent by Persian workers to the national parliament, or to local or national authorities, there are often references to the discriminatory policies adopted by APOC, segregating Indian and Persian employees with regard to wages, housing, provision of drinking water, sanitation, medical care, and leisure.⁸³

Why should be there differences between Indians and Persians, while they are both workers? The Indian hospital located in the neighbourhood called *company* is well equipped, while the Persian hospital in the dirty and malodorous neighbourhood of *Sheikh* is nothing [and] lacks all essential equipment.⁸⁴

After Reza Khan (later Reza Shah) rose to power in the 1920s, his new government promoted territorial-state nationalism, to glorify the authoritarian modernization program and the new state-building project. According to APOC authorities, when Reza Khan visited the oil industry in southern Persia in 1924 as Prime Minister, he was deeply disappointed when “he did not see a single Persian employed in the Abadan Refinery.”⁸⁵

The Iranization of labor in the oil industry was juxtaposed with Iranian endeavors to build a centralized modern state after the First World War.⁸⁶ After a brief military operation led by Reza Khan (both Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief) in 1924–1925, the central government ended the era of local autonomy for Sheikh Khaza‘al in Khuzestan. The Sheikh was known as a long-standing British protégé in the Persian Gulf. His arrest and move to Tehran reinforced Iranian territorial nationalism and helped to clear the way for Reza Khan to be crowned as Reza Shah Pahlavi, founder of the Pahlavi royal dynasty.

One of the major effects of state-sponsored Iranian nationalism on the oil industry was that pressure was put on the APOC to improve working and living conditions in the oil industry, and accelerate the process of Iranization by training up indigenous workers and replacing Indians by Iranians. On a second visit to Khuzestan in 1928, Reza Shah declined to visit the oil installation, despite APOC’s welcome. According to *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, a national newspaper, it was “popular dislike” that induced the King not to visit:

The Company does not deal fairly with people and only has its own interests in mind. The Company’s officials do not see themselves as mere representatives of a commercial enterprise, they prefer to meddle in all affairs and they even have a political office. ... That acts as the embassy of a powerful nation in a weak country. ... Generally speaking, the attitude of the Company before the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty was akin to the East India Company’s stance in the India of two centuries earlier. It is for this reason and for hundreds of other minor issues that the people here [in Khuzestan] do not like the Company. Consequently, the public opinion was not in favour of seeing their King as a guest of the Company.⁸⁷

The prevalence of such bitter anticolonial sentiment among Iranian workers vis-à-vis APOC translated into a more confrontational stance toward Indian employees. In response, Indian employees tried to secure better protection from APOC, disassociated more from the local community, and in fact

began to identify themselves more with the European staff in the oil industry than with the Persian community. For example, when on March 11, 1928 rumors spread about APOC's intention to "fire 10,000 Iranians, while thousands of Indian and Iraqis are still working for the Oil Company," the Indian working community in Abadan was harassed. The following day, a crowd of Iranian workers "congregated in front of the Company's Labor Office in Abadan and stoned the Office."⁸⁸

However, the most explicit example of the prevailing nationalist sentiments was during the course of 1929 strike. As mentioned earlier, one of the demands of the strikers was total equality between Indian and Persian employees. In the capital Tehran, the press supported the strike. APOC was accused of practicing racial discrimination, and there were complaints that its Indian employees ruled over Iranians. In a nocturnal handout (*shabnameh*) distributed during this period addressing "Our Crowned father, Government and Court Officials," the Iranian worker was described as the "glorious and noble son of Darius," who had to "suffer under the tutelage of the British and particularly their Indian clerks and middlemen, sacrificing everything for the interest of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company."⁸⁹ Such propagandist literature, according to James Bamberg, was "prominent, a ritual prophylactic incantation against malign foreign influence."⁹⁰

The new Agreement of 1933 between the Iranian government and APOC, which annulled the D'Arcy concession of 1901, emphasized the earlier demand that APOC should recruit its artisans, technicians, and commercial staff among Persians. In the opinion of the Persian press, canceling the D'Arcy concession was an act of "political emancipation" and a "new page to Persian honour"—not only did it return the "national wealth" to the country, but also ended a lengthy era of "favouritism towards Indian employees."⁹¹

The Second World War reached Iran in August 1941. On August 25, 1941, the British and Soviet Forces simultaneously launched their military offense against Iran. British troops comprising a large number of Indian combatants invaded Khuzestan and Soviet Forces occupied the Iranian Northern provinces from Azerbaijan to Khorasan. During the British and Soviet military presence in Iran, every effort was made by the Allied Forces to avoid any disruption in the Allied support for the Soviet fronts. During the war, some two thirds of Iran's economy in one way or another were associated with Allied activities in the country and any possible disruption of this association could be considered an act of sabotage.⁹² The oil and its

supply to the Soviet Union was a hallowed sector where the labor agitation was strictly prohibited. Abstaining from open agitation among the labor of the oil and the transport industries, chiefly rail workers during the war, the labor unions decided to commence activities in the central provinces of the country, by organizing large sectors of the workers in and launching strikes and street protests for better working and living conditions. However, it was only by the end of the war and after the departure of the British troops from the Iranian soil on March 10, 1946, when the labor movement in the oil industry decanted their covertly organized army to the street of the major oil cities in south. Celebrating the Labor Day of May 1946 with a series of lively and vibrant processions was, indeed, the result of the labor union 5 years rigorous clandestine activities.

During the British Forces occupation of Khuzestan, the Indian community in the southern province was comprised of the first cluster of the migrant workers, a total of 1000 workers and clerks, a cluster of newly (1942–1946) recruited of 2500 workers and some large but unknown number of Indian combating forces of the British Army. The British Command in Khuzestan stationed these Indian combating forces to guard the oil installation and custody the security of major oil cities. This situation in due course soured relation between Iranian and Indian community. In one 1942 episode, known as the Bahmanshir incident, three Indian soldiers refused to pay a prostitute after enjoying her “service” in the Abadan Bazaar; another six Indian employees of the oil company engaged in a “bout of *araq*-drinking” and abused a local boy and women passing by. These events triggered major ethnic tension in the city, and ended in bloody clashes between Indians and Iranians communities, with casualties and large losses of property.⁹³

Events such as the Bahmanshir incident were irrefutably colored by sectarian features, and had ethnic and cultural dimensions; however, there were other dimensions in the Indian labors community, and not the cluster of Indian soldiers at the service of British Army, interaction with the Iranian workers. A vibrant example of such class interaction occurred during the 1946 strike in the Iranian oil industry. The strike broke out among the workers in the Abadan Oil Refinery in the early hours of a summer day, July 14, 1946. Within hours, it spread throughout the Province of Khuzestan, engulfing the oil industry as a whole. During the 60 h, it was held; the general strike mobilized some 70,000 Iranian and Indian manual and clerical workers and broke, by a considerable margin, the record of any labor walkout convened hitherto in Iranian history.

However, with some fourthly seven deaths and hundred seventy casualties, it was recorded as the bloodiest labor protest in Middle East labor history.⁹⁴

Revisiting the chronology and outcome of the strike exposes that from the early days, following the British Forces evacuation from Khuzestan, the Indian workers joined the labor protest both in the oilfields as well as the refinery; however, what became alarming for the oil company was the solidarity some of the Indian workers proudly displayed with one of the labor unions, the Central Council of Federated Trade Union (CCFTU) which was associated with the communist leaning, the Tudeh Party of Iran. During the May Day demonstration of 1946, some 80,000 demonstrators, including Indian workers, rallied through the old town of Abadan. The March exuded a carnivalesque atmosphere as national anthems blared and workers chanted slogans in Persian, Arabic, Hindi, Armenian, and Assyrian. Later, according to a report signed by the Consul for Indian Affairs at the British Embassy in Tehran, one of the Indian workers by the name of Mohamad Ahmad Farooqi, with a “very pronounced communistic tendencies, managed to secure the leadership of the Indian artisans, who number about 1400–1500 and appealed [to] Tudeh [Party] leaders to help the Indians.” The report continues by arguing that “this contact between the Indian community and the Tudeh and Mohammad Ahmad Farooqi’s leadership was the beginning of the trouble amongst the Indian workers.”⁹⁵

On July 5, about 1000 Indian workers marched to the British Consul in Khoramshahr, sitting in front of the Consulate, demanding to meet the British Consul in order to convey their grievances. In their meeting with the Consul, the Indian workers confirmed that they have come from all over the province. During the meeting, a number of their leaders such as Kabul Singh and Shamsheer Khan called for the removal of the Indian Assistant Labor Officer, Asghar Ali, Welfare Officer, Alaf Shah, and his Quarter Master, Mohamad Ismail. On the following day, the protestors stated their grievances in a petition signed by 1135 Indian workers and delivered it to the British Consulate through a committee of 17 men. The grievances included the zealous exercise of power by the Labor Officer laying off workers without providing compensation to workers for their return travel costs, which according to the company’s own rules had to cover their return to Bombay. Additional complaints against the Welfare Officer included poor accommodation or lack of sports facilities.

The petitioners demanded the immediate removal of both the Assistant Labor as well as the Welfare Officers.

In a meeting that the Labor Officer had with the British Counsel, he rejected the complaints of the protesters and accused the petitioners of committing subversive activities. According to an intelligence report compiled by the British Consul in Khoramshahr, the Labor Officer disclosed the emergent solidarity between the Indian and Iranian workers during the past years. According to the Labor Officers' account, "the Indian artisans came in contact with some prominent members of the CCFTU, specially Husain Muradi, Jahangir, Safa, and Torabi, when they visited the artisans club frequently and addressed the Indian artisans several times in their club. On one occasion, he [Asghar Ali] was also present, and Torabi, a prominent Iranian CCFTU labor activist, told the artisans in a forceful speech that the Tudeh is willing to help the Indians who were their brothers, and that they must unite and should get rid of their Labor and Welfare Officers and that these officers should be selected from amongst the members of the labor class."⁹⁶

In the early June 1946, the empathetic reciprocity of Indian workers with their Iranian counterparts had reached such levels that on one occasion on 16 June when the CCFTU was holding one of its sequential meetings in South Ahmadabad district of Abadan, a group of 200 Indian workers marched from their quarters and attended the meeting, shouting pro-CCFTU slogans.⁹⁷ By this time, there were 700 Indian workers who had joined the CCFTU.⁹⁸ Together with the Deputy General Manager of the Oil Company, the Consul for Indian Affairs at the British Embassy in Tehran compiled a list of 41 Indian labor activists and "revolutionary speakers," 10 with communist leanings. All of the workers named in this list were nominally Muslim, except for two Sikhs.

There are no records of casualties of Indian worker during the bloody strike of July 1946. However, we know that, in the following months and years, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company along with conducting other anti-labor coercive policies steadily reduced the number of Indian workers in the oil industry. The 5 years following the July strike of 1946 coincides with termination of the British Raj and independence of India in August 1947 and the movement for nationalization of the Iranian oil industry which finally was celebrated in March 1951. The nationalization of Iranian oil industry was not solely the result of tenacious performance of some political elite, as has been largely noted in the historiography of

nationalization of Iranian oil, but, also and equally the outcome of enduring pressure from below, chiefly by oil workers.⁹⁹ On March 20, 1951, the Iranian both parliaments ratified the bill nationalizing the Iranian oil industry, and 6 months later, on October 4, 1951, all European and majority of Indian employees of the AIOC left Abadan.¹⁰⁰

Some Indian employees of the AIOC petitioned the Iranian parliament with a request to stay. The parliament responded favorably to the appeal.¹⁰¹ Although the exact number of Indian workers who remained in Iran is unknown, there must have been quite a few. Even today, senior Abadanis can recall the presence of Indians workers community in everyday life within the city.

CONCLUSION

Following the discovery of oil in southern Persia in the early twentieth century, a massive recruitment campaign was launched for employing Indian skilled and semiskilled workers for the newborn Persian oil industry. These newcomers were engine drivers, marine signalmen, boilermakers, pipe fitters, butlers, cooks, and dhobis. They constituted a new army of labor on the March, bringing technical knowledge and industrial skills to Persia. In the new networks of human interaction, foreign workers gradually replaced foreign soldiers. Both Indian soldiers and Indian civilians fell under the discipline of colonial rule and were subjected to its priorities. The new international networks, which were established, proved to be essential and extremely lucrative for the emerging oil capitalism. Yet, they had also a subversive dimension, once they associated with new political ideas from elsewhere and were globally linked to experiences of labor activism in other places. Indian migrant workers not only played an important role in the founding, development, and eventual consolidation of the Persian/Iranian oil industry, they also contributed to the formation of a labor movement in Iran.

NOTES

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11. Willem van Schendel, "Spatial Moments: Chittagong in Four Scenes," in *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places*, ed. Helen Siu and Eric Tagliacozzo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). I am grateful to Willem van Schendel for providing me with valuable information on the categorization of the Chittagonian workforce.
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16. Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, 2002), 274–304.
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23. Ibid.
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27. British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338; George Thomson, "Abadan During the World War," *Naft* 8, no. 5 (September 1932), 9.
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29. British Petroleum Archive, ARC 68779, Strick, Scott & Co. to Wilson, 7 October 1916.
30. British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338, George Thomson, "Abadan During the World War," *Naft* 8, no. 5 (September 1932), 9.
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