

Indian convict ship mutinies in the mid-nineteenth century

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Abstract

This paper is part of a broader project that seeks to ‘read against the grain’ in reconstructing the experiences of convicts transported overseas to prisons and penal settlements in South and Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century. In many ways, convict ships are empty archival spaces; for whilst colonial officials recorded the departure and arrival of transportation convicts – often in meticulous detail – the experiences of the convict men and women on board are more difficult to access. I want to try and do so through an examination of the ‘spaces of disorder’ represented by convict ship mutinies. During the 1830s and 40s, there were more than half a dozen incidents in which convicts rose against their captains and made a bid for freedom. These mutinies were transgressive acts that reveal much of conditions on board ship, the alliances forged between convicts and crew, the political economy of capture and the gendering of punishment – not to mention the problems of fixing identities that I have discussed elsewhere. Mutiny narratives also reveal ‘spaces of disorder’ within the discourses of colonialism. As such, they are part of what Antoinette Burton has described as the ‘unfinished business’ of colonial modernity.

Introduction: convict ship mutinies

This paper began as a series of tantalizing references in the Judicial Proceedings holdings of the India Office Library. For nearly ten years now, I have been researching the penal settlements established by the British, from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. The settlements were all in recent colonial acquisitions, and thousands of Indian convicts were shipped to them, and put to work on infrastructural labour projects. They were at Bencoolen (1787-1825), Penang, otherwise known as Prince of Wales Island (1790-1860), Mauritius (1815-53), Malacca and Singapore (1825-60), and the Burmese provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim (1828-62). The trade in convicts was not one-way; convicts were also transported from the Straits Settlements (as Penang, Malacca and Singapore were known after 1825) and Burma to mainland jails across India throughout the nineteenth century.

When I was asked to join this panel, I felt that the moment had come to look at a series of papers on convict ship mutinies that I had been indexing carefully. I thought it would take me a week – two at the most. But then a fortnight became three weeks, and

then four. Three months later and I had in my possession a mass of archival material – the depositions of convicts and crew, correspondence within and between the presidencies and settlements, ship lists and newspaper reports - relating to ten convict ship mutinies in the period 1827-59 (six occurred during the ten year period 1838-48). Five took place between Bombay and the Straits Settlements, one between Bengal and the Straits, and one between Bombay and Mauritius. Two convict vessels sailing from the Straits to Bombay also mutinied. There was one more – mounted by ninety-two Hong Kong convicts en route to Singapore on the *General Wood*. Their trial caused a sensation, and afterwards Governor Butterworth was apparently sympathetic to settler demands to end the transportation of Chinese convicts to the Straits (Turnbull, 1970). Additionally, a group of Punjabi convicts seized the *Kalleegunga*, on which they were being sent to Calcutta for transportation overseas, near Patna. As far as I am aware, this is a fully inclusive list for this period; except for the seven convicts of the *Lady Wallace* who took the opportunity to jump ship when it was wrecked off Cape Comorin in 1840. (See Appendix). There were no mutinies by Madras convicts. To put these mutinies in perspective, three or four ships left from each of the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies for the Straits Settlements or Burma each year, and about the same number brought convicts from the Straits Settlements to mainland jails. The number of convicts on board was widely variable, from less than a dozen to over one hundred. I began to wonder whether my twenty minute conference paper on convict ship mutinies had in fact become a book – and more to the point whether even then I would ever be able to make sense of the multi-layered complexities of these dramatic events.

I had originally planned to use convict ship mutinies as historical moments in which we learn something of what I termed the empty archival spaces that convict ships usually occupied (see Abstract above). We know much of the tendering process that surrounded the chartering of Indian convict ships; we know how much it cost to transport convicts; we know about shipping regulations; we know what provisions were supposed to be supplied; we know when convict ships left and when they arrived. We know a great deal about the convicts themselves. Indeed, I have used the minute detail with which convicts were counted and described to think about the relationship between the criminal body and colonial modernity in my most recent work (Anderson, 2004). However, we do not know much about the process of transportation itself, and how it was played out on board ship. I thought that the records on ship mutinies would provide a way in – extraordinary events that would tell us about the *quotidian*. And I was not disappointed.

On board the convict ship

Marcus Rediker has written of the 'industrial' nature of early-modern ships, and the careful organization and division of labour above deck. In his view, the ship was at the centre of a sphere of circulation that exploited labour capital. (Rediker, 1987). I would argue that this was also the case for Indian convict ships, as they transported their cargo overseas to work in new colonial acquisitions. They too were remarkably hierarchical places, with convicts carefully integrated into working life on board. Convicts of diverse regional origin, social and economic background and religion were chosen, through a mixture of their social origins, skill base and previous good behaviour, to work on board. They were employed above deck as sweepers, cooks and overseers for and of their fellow transportees, who remained for most of the day below. Undoubtedly, this was a boon to ships' officers, but it could also prove to be their downfall. Employment on board gave convicts the freedom to move around the ship – or as it was later put in the investigation into the 1843 mutiny on board the *Harriet Scott*, to 'observe and devise the insurrection'. As in the case of the *Clarissa* (1854), these working convicts were often not fettered. The cooks of the *Freak* (1841) apparently took the opportunity to unpadlock their fellow convicts' irons. Parsi convicts, in accordance with the special treatment they received during the period of British rule more generally (Luhmann, 1996), were given a remarkable degree of liberty on board. They were separated from other convicts and, as such, were a potential source of discontent amongst them. This was the case during the attempted mutiny on the *Catherine* in 1838, after which the two Parsis on board were pardoned for rendering assistance to the crew.

Second, the conditions on board ship – or these ships at least – were challenging to say the least. From the records, one can almost feel the heat and the overcrowding. The smell below deck was so disgusting that even contemporary officials found it difficult to describe. Not infrequently, convicts were ill before they embarked, adding to their misery – and the stench of seasickness and night soil. In 1827, the seven convicts of the *Constance* refused to go below deck at the usual time of 8pm, it being 'hot enough to kill them'. After staving off threatened mutiny, the captain of the *Catherine*, Frederick Pendencygrass, went down into the convict hold, describing it as so filthy that had the ship continued on its voyage, disease would have broken out. The acting senior magistrate of police in Bombay was unable to find words to describe it. Several convicts sick with venereal and other diseases had been embarked, with no medicines to ease their condition. When questioned by the colonial authorities after their recapture in Burma, a number of convicts of the *Clarissa* spoke of the seasickness that had left them incapacitated. Unlike slave ships, or vessels sailing from Britain to the penal settlements

in Australia, Indian transportation ships were not specially fitted out for convicts, and no surgeons accompanied them. Convicts slept below deck in makeshift prisons, side-by-side with the ships' other cargo - bales of cotton, reels of silk, fresh dates, chests of opium, rattan canes, and sacks of betel nut – all of which convict mutineers found a useful source of income if they made it to dry land. There were regulations governing the amount of space allowed to convicts. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that on occasion overcrowding was a problem in quarters where even according to the regulations convicts would have been packed in like beans in a can. The *Freak* for instance carried six convicts over quota. The ship had been declared fit to receive forty-one convicts, but forty-seven were embarked. More distressingly the *Catherine* took sixty convicts, almost double the number it had been certified to carry.

It was the responsibility of each ship's owners to supply the convicts' rations (basic rice, dhal and condiments), and provision for this was included in the *per capita* shipping rate. Although supplies were in theory inspected before ships departed, evidence suggests that captains sometimes skimmed on them, and provisions either ran short or were of questionable quality. Convicts on the *Singapore Packet* (1841) held that their provisions were 'bad'; those of the *Virginia* (1839) claimed that they were less substantial than the allowance they had received in jail. During the subsequent trial, their cross-examination of the witnesses (for this was a right accorded to convicts in court) attempted to show that they were 'starved and ill-treated'. The outbreak on the *Clarissa* started when a convict complained that he did not get enough water, and struck the sepoy guard on the head with his *lotah*, a brass drinking vessel which had been used by convicts with devastating effect before – in the murder of the British superintendent of India's largest jail, Alipur, in 1834. Third Mate Charles Blaney later said that 'the convicts used to grumble about not having enough water'. Boor Singh, one of the convicts put it like this: 'In the ship we all got cheated out of our provisions. Short measure and not enough water. All men discontented and began to be alarmed at our fate.' Five of the eighty convicts shipped from the Straits Settlements to Bombay on the *City of Palaces* in 1858 died on the way, an astonishingly high death rate for a system in which convict mortality rates were very low indeed (less than one per cent).¹ Nearly all were suffering from scurvy on their arrival, and sixteen were so weak they could not walk from the railway station to the jail. The assistant sessions judge wrote of their emaciation, sickness and suffering. It seems that their food and water had run short during the four-month voyage (twenty-five days from Singapore to Penang, and three months from Penang to Bombay),

¹ In all probability because weaker convicts had already died while awaiting their transportation in prison.

and some of the convicts had determined to take over the ship. Mutiny was averted when one of the convicts informed on the rest, and the captain chained all but eight together for the remainder of the journey, where they were forced to eat, sleep and answer the call of nature.

Third, mutinies were not simply convict responses to conditions on board ship, or surely many convicts would have mutinied. They took place overwhelmingly amongst transported convicts who had experience at sea. I think this explains why convict mutinies occurred mostly on vessels sailing out of Bombay or the Straits Settlements, rather than Bengal or Madras. Two of the *Virginia* convicts, for instance, were sailors by profession; at least one of the convicts shipped on the *Catherine* had been a lascar. Many of the convicts shipped from the Straits had been convicted of piracy – as in the case of eight of the sixteen convicts shipped on board the *Harriet Scott*, and the fifty-two pirates embarked on the *Ararat* in 1859. The convicts of the *General Wood* too carried ninety-two pirates from Hong Kong to Singapore. It was not simply that convict seafarers were on board though, for there are hints in the papers that captains of vessels sometimes took those convicts on as crew, though they were not supposed to. This was an informal arrangement through which the former gained a free pair of hands and the latter escaped from the privations below deck. After he was picked up at sea, the captain of the shipwrecked *Lady Wallace*, for instance, declined to mention that he had convicts on board, and when challenged to hand them over to the authorities refused, stating that they were like ‘private servants to him’.

Of course if convicts could persuade ships’ crews to assist them, skills at sea were not so important, and this brings me on to another point – the alliances forged between convicts and crew. The possibility of such collusion was frequently a focus for post-mutiny investigations, with the colonial authorities concerned about the role played by ships crews during convict takeovers. As Linebaugh and Rediker have pointed out, crews were international and often found themselves locked up in the jails of colonial port cities (Rediker and Linebaugh, 2000), which suggests that they might have had sympathy with their convict cargo. It is of course difficult to make sense of the material, for crews had an obvious reason for downplaying their role during colonial investigations, and convicts an obvious reason for playing it up. Yet there is little if any evidence that crews knew about let alone helped convicts in the execution of mutinies, and it is perhaps worthy of note that no crew members were ever convicted alongside their convict charge. All too often, when convicts took to arms, ship crews scrambled up the rigging or jumped overboard to meet their fate in Davy Jones’ locker. The *clashie* (XX) on board the *Clarissa*, for instance, claimed that most of his comrades were either shot or jumped

overboard in the affray. He himself with about ten others had gone up the rigging, and only came down when the convicts promised to spare their lives if they would sail the ship for them. When they landed on shore, the convicts took them prisoner. The *burra tindal* (head XX) spoke of the lascars being 'set to work'. What is more tangible is the extent to which convicts and crew had the chance to interact on board. Convicts employed on board were on deck most of the time; others came up for air every day. Convicts and crew cooked together; ships' cooks usually prepared Muslim convicts' rations together with those of the lascars, separately from the Hindus. During the *Virginia* trial, convict Saduck Ali claimed that the crew had given them marijuana to smoke, and after three days without food their 'heads were turned'. It was this that had led to the mutiny. Another fear on the part of the colonial authorities was the ambivalence of the sepoy (Indian soldier) guard in preventing mutiny. The regulations on transportation itself were framed according to notions of race and loyalty: one European guard was considered equal to three convicts, and one Indian equal to one convict. In each of these outbreaks, the requisite number of guards was on board, and so at worst colonial officials considered the Indian guard collusive and at best inactive in putting down uprisings. Of course this fed into broader colonial discourses about the unmanly, cowardly native (Sinha, 1995).

Fourth, there were other practical limitations faced by convicts. To be successful, convicts had to have access to the ship's weapons - and know how to use them. In almost every case where they managed to seize ships' arms it is clear that the regulations on convict transportation in this respect had been flouted. On occasion, not enough care was taken with the passing of convicts between decks, or large numbers of convicts were allowed on deck at once. The secretary to government Bombay put the mutiny on the *Recovery* (1846) down to slack management in the movement of convicts around the ship; the superintendent of the Indian navy concluded that this was the cause of events on the *Virginia*: all thirty-four convicts were on deck at the same time. Sometimes weaponry was not properly locked up. Eighteen loaded muskets were apparently stored within arms reach of the *Kalleegunga* convicts' sleeping quarters. Sheikh Ramran, a sepoy guard, wrote that during his five former trips with convicts he had never seen arrangements such as were made on board the *Clarissa*. He claimed that the muskets were kept on deck and the ammunition in the main hatch (i.e. at some distance away), and that twelve convicts were always on deck, four without handcuffs. One convict, he said, was even in charge of the captain's swords and muskets. In this, as in the rationing and fitting out of convict ships, there was often a large gap between the rules and practices of convict transportation. Access to arms did not however imply successful use of them. One of the

convicts from the *Clarissa* stated in his defence: 'I am a cultivator ... I never knew how to hold a musket how could I have fired one on board[?]'.

Additionally, the fetters provided for securing convicts were sometimes useless – those used on the *Harriet Scott* were apparently so big that convicts simply slipped them off. The irons worn by the *Recovery* convicts received from the districts were said to be too light – so convicts could march from jail to port more easily. Captain Thomas Johnson deposed: 'their irons are of no use only to deceive us.' As I have noted elsewhere, heavy fetters simultaneously sustained and confounded convict discipline, and for this reason in practice lighter ones serving as little more than a visual tag of criminality were often used (Anderson, 2004). In the case of the *Kalleegunga*, the convicts were locked on a single chain padlocked at one end only. If one man needed to be released, the whole had to be unlocked. When two men were let off to answer the call of nature, the remaining convicts accordingly took this chance to slip off the chains and attack the ship's officers.

The records generated by investigations into convict mutinies thus provide us with the glimpse of life on board transportation ships that I had hoped for, and these tales of the flouting of regulations and practical limitations on board ship reveal what Antoinette Burton has described as the 'unfinished business' of colonial modernity (Burton, 1999). The papers on ongoing attempts to arrest those convicts who made it to the mainland spoke to me on a very similar point, illustrating the limitations of the technologies of criminal identification during this period that I have written about before. It was not easy to recognize escaped convicts, particularly because Bombay convicts did not have the penal tattoos inscribed on offenders from Bengal during this period (Anderson, 2004). Prompted by substantial rewards (up to Rs 100), many arrests of suspected *Virginia* convicts were made, for instance, and suspects released when it was proved that they were not in fact escaped convicts but pilgrims, *fakirs*, itinerant traders, horse dealers and the like.

However, the records ran far deeper than I had imagined when I first thought about how these papers might be used, for the mutinies also provided a window on some of the complexities of subaltern life and anti-colonial feeling during the first half of the nineteenth century. As violent colonial events directed against European captains, chief mates and first officers, they seemed to be collisions of colonial worlds. Yet they also showed how blurred the boundaries between the seemingly diametrically opposed spaces of elites and subalterns were. In the analysis that follows, I want to conceptualize convict mutinies as spaces of disorder once again, but this time unpeel some of their onion layers to suggest they were riddled with fractures and alliances based on loose affiliations of

class, religion and caste. I also want to show that in these worlds turned upside down their authority structures were strongly mimetic rather than entirely anti-colonial in nature. Finally, colonial responses to convict mutiny were sometimes confused, with congratulatory notes in the press about the firm actions of ships crews masking deeper divisions about how to deal with the issue of authority at sea.

Authority at Sea

Before turning to a detailed analysis of one mutiny – that which took place on board the convict ship *Clarissa* - I would like to make some comments about the personal nature of authority at sea and its often violent and arbitrary nature (Rediker, 1987). In at least two cases it was this that precipitated convict mutiny. The attempt to seize the *Catherine* in 1839 took place after a convict complained about his fetters (or rations, depending on which report you believe) and Captain Pendygrass slapped him around the face, threatening him with a flogging. One of the *Virginia* convicts, Hameer Rhadoo, claimed in court that Captain Whiffen had threatened to seize any man who was seasick, and throw him overboard. Other convicts spoke of being kicked and thrown down by him. When the convicts of the *Singapore Packet* (1841) complained about their rations, they were unsatisfied by Captain Tingate's response, and broke out of their accommodation below deck. Though it is not exactly clear what happened next, four of them died from the wounds they received in the ensuing fight. Governor S.G. Bonham, congratulated the captain, with the press reporting his most satisfactory 'bold and manly conduct'. Attempted mutiny on board the *Recovery* in 1846 was suppressed with some brutality. Captain Johnson gave all convicts on deck at the time three dozen lashes, and twenty 'Moguls' 'as much as they could take', his being assured that they were at the bottom of events. The *Bengal Hurkaru* later reported these actions of 'courage and promptitude.' After an attempted mutiny on board the *Ararat*, sailing from the Straits Settlements to Bombay in 1859, Captain J.M. Correya stripped all the surviving convicts naked, and gave them as much of a flogging as they could stand: three and in some cases four dozen lashes. This included those who it was obvious had taken no part in the disturbance because they had been locked in the hold the whole time. Though the government solicitor recommended that legal proceedings be instituted against him for a harsh and unnecessarily severe act, again the *Hurkaru* congratulated this man 'of courage and pluck' for staving off disaster. The captain claimed that he stripped the convicts to make sure none had hidden weapons, but there is no doubt that this was an emasculating punishment which, as I have argued elsewhere, was an important part of colonial penal

strategies (Anderson, 2004). The case was brought before the senior magistrate of police, but he decided to take no action beyond recommending that Captain Correya should not command transportation ships in future.

Given the stakes – and knowledge of convicts' former successes that must surely have prayed on captains' minds especially during the 1840s - the violence directed against convict mutineers is perhaps unsurprising. Yet as we have seen, there was a fine line between what was acceptable and what was not, and a certain colonial ambivalence about the issue. Like the captain of the *Ararat*, the chief mate of the *Harriet Scott* John MacDuff was lucky to escape a jail sentence. Fourteen of the sixteen convicts on board had mutinied en route from Penang to Bombay in 1843. They killed Captain Benyon and for a brief time took control of the ship. Seven of the convicts escaped (they were later taken back to Penang by another vessel), and the crew finally managed to overpower the remainder. MacDuff had drunk a considerable amount of brandy and was - according to the testimony of Robert Cort, a passenger on board - staggering about. In this drunken state, MacDuff shot two convicts who had taken no part in the mutiny. Together with second mate Thomas Jones, Cort put MacDuff in irons. MacDuff was arrested when the ship arrived back in Penang and put on trial, but he was acquitted. Though the judge congratulated him on the verdict, the secretary to the government of Bombay later wrote that he was disappointed that he had not been convicted. The courts were not so slow to condemn the violence of convict mutineers. When the charges against them could be proved they were sentenced to death.

By using the violence formerly directed against them, convict mutineers mimicked the captain and his crew, and relished the opportunity to turn the nature of violence at sea on its head. When the captain of the *Clarissa* was put into the jolly boat, fatally wounded, there was according to one of the witnesses 'a very great noise in the ship'. Michael Anthony, a convict on the *Freak*, spoke of the attack against Captain Thomas Suffield during the trial. He said that the convicts had first tied the captain up:

The 2nd Prisoner kicked the Captain when he asked for water, he had tied up his irons and so was able to kick the Captain. Then the 5th Prisoner Ethaljagajee who had had beat rice and sugar with grain as he would not eat what was cooked (and had the day before made complaint and was threatened with reduction of allowance) kicked the Captain and said he should have only two tinpots.

This inversion of authority structures also hints at the violation of caste that crossing the ocean could bring to some Hindu convicts – Ethaljagejee's inability to eat cooked food on board. Saduck Ali of the *Virginia* made a similar claim, stating that Hindu convicts

could not eat their rice ration. He alluded to the transgression crossing the *kala pani* (black waters or the ocean) could bring, stating at his trial that the Hindus on board thought: 'Death was preferable, god was above and the sea below'. After cutting the captain and chief mate's throats, the *Freak* convicts chained them up before throwing them overboard. It seems – as second mate Francis Ward said - that after the crew had uncovered a plot by the convicts the captain had chained all of them to the chain cable, thinking that if they rose they could all be thrown over board with the anchor. According to Michael Anthony one of the convicts said: “now this chain has been so many days on your legs is now on their's”.

There is also some suggestion that events on the *Freak* were the result of particular desires on the part of the Muslim convicts. Michael Anthony claimed that after killing the chief mate, one of the convicts declared: “now all the poison all the liquor is coming out.” They then threw the crew's shoes overboard, declaring them “infidels' things”. Once rid of the ship's crew, the convicts resolved to go to Mecca (second mate Francis Ward's testimony is in agreement with Michael Anthony's on this point). When they realized they would likely be taken up at sea, they decided to go to Acheen [check contemporary sp.] instead – according to Michael Anthony because 'all are Musselmen there and they would be safe.' He claimed that the leader, Hadjee Hussain, asked the second mate whose country it was:

he said a Mohamedan country, the inhabitants are Malay. Hadjee Hussain asked if there are any English? the 2nd mate said “No” if the English go there they are killed and if an English vessel go there, all the men are killed and the ship plundered, Hadjee Hussain asked how large is the country 2nd mate said 14 miles broad and 200 long. The Rajah and Troops reside there, and 12 Governors in different parts, so Hadjee Hussain said “take the vessel there” and the 2nd mate steered for Acheen.

In the case of the *Recovery*, too, the convicts were said to have sworn on the Koran to mutiny. Before the ship set sail it was rumoured that some Arab vessels would be waiting in the harbour to help them. When they did not appear, the captain dropped his guard, and it was then that the convicts rose. As we will see, the convicts shipped on the *General Wood* had their own dreams of freedom, attempting to sail the vessel back to China.

A second aspect of the inversion of authority at sea was the destruction of the ship's papers – especially the ship's log and the roll individually identifying each convict – as in the case of the *Freak*, the *Virginia* and the *Clarissa*. The ripping up or burning of official papers – the monotonous daily record that might have damned an individual or in which each convict was carefully registered and described – was a highly symbolic act, for

convicts were only convicts when their bodily characteristics could be matched to their criminal record. Officials going on board ships after mutinies frequently described how their papers were strewn all around, scenes of disorder standing in stark contrast to the methodical order of colonial record-keeping.

Third, after taking ships, convicts often dressed themselves in the clothes of the captain and his officers. The *Freak* convicts for instance adorned themselves with the garb of the captain and chief mate, as did those of the *General Wood*. The leaders of the *Virginia* convicts too put on the captain's coat and hat. There is no evidence that convicts stripped ships' officers; rather clothes were stolen from the hold. This was possibly meant to fool passing ships that all was in order, but these acts were also clear inversions of authority. Yet authority was not overturned altogether and convicts used clothing in their construction of alternative structures of command. Dress became a visual token of status and power – convict leaders usually wore the captain's coat, sash and sword; others took silk handkerchiefs and wore them around their necks. Finally, feasting at the captain's table usually followed a successful mutiny. Like the pirates who enjoyed what Rediker has termed a carnivalesque atmosphere on board (Rediker, 1987), convicts slaughtered livestock and ate to excess. The *Freak* convicts made pilaf and curry for all on board, and turned the ship's stock of sugar into sherbet. The *Virginia* convicts too dined at the captain's table. In these extraordinary scenes, dressed in the garb of captain and crew and feasting on their provisions, convicts must have delighted at their metaphorical capsizing of the transportation ship.

'The Feringees are flying – the ship is ours': mutiny on the *Clarissa*

The mutiny on board the *Clarissa* in 1854 caused a sensation, and it is incredible that – to my knowledge – it has not been discussed in historical literature before. In the words of the advocate general of Bengal, it was a case of 'great atrocity and destruction of life', and example had to be made of the ringleaders. After their recapture, 133 convicts were placed on trial in the district court of Amherst (Moulmein), each charged with 'being an accomplice in the murder of the captain and part of the crew and guard on board the *Clarissa* and in escaping from custody, from the said barque, and affray with culpable homicide'. In a thirteen-day hearing Captain S.R. Tickell (principal commissioner of the Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces) in his capacity as district magistrate convicted twenty-nine of the convicts of affray with culpable homicide and four of murder, and directed that they be committed to trial in the appropriate court, as his district court had no jurisdiction to try offences committed on the high seas. He wrote that

they had attacked the captain and crew with ‘every kind of missile they could lay their hands on’, and caused the death of many more who jumped overboard. Almost half the total number of crew and guard – thirty-one out of a total of sixty-one - died. Those convicts fit to travel (129) were returned to Bengal to face trial in Calcutta’s supreme court (admiralty side). The chief judge, Sir J. Colville, stated that it was the most serious case that he had ever come across. Company officials decided to try the convicts under three heads other than piratical seizure of the vessel: eighteen men were charged with the murder of the captain, three more with the murder of the *subadar* [head of military guard] and *havildar* [X] of the guard, and one with shooting a *clashie* after he jumped overboard. The difficulty for the authorities was, of course, as in all mutiny cases that reached the courts, proving that individual convicts had committed specific acts. In the confusion that characterized outbreaks on board ships, this was not easy, particularly as the leaders of mutinies like these were often killed on the spot. As the government solicitor in Bombay put it in his legal opinion on the attempted mutiny on the *Ararat* (1859), proceedings could not be taken against convicts for simply ‘yelling’ or ‘being disobedient’. Sixteen of the *Clarissa* men died after their capture and readmission to Alipur Jail, and most of the remainder were transported to serve their original sentence – as the judge put it ‘to that place of exile and that life of slavery to which you have been already condemned’. These men were marked out, and they would not be allowed to earn remission of sentence through future good behaviour, like other convicts in the Straits Settlements. Four of them were sentenced to death.

The *Clarissa* left Calcutta on 26 April 1854, destined for the penal settlement at Malacca. The pre-embarkation survey had reported that the ship could hold 155 convicts. On reading this report, the superintendent of marine noted that the usual space allowed to each convict was 6ft by _ ft – and by this measure it could carry 171 men. Whether this was a decisive factor in the mutiny on board is not clear, but it is certain that the very maximum number of convicts was squeezed on board. First Officer James Squire later reported that when the convicts first embarked, they complained to him, the captain and the *subadar* of the guard about the lack of room. Goolah, a *clashie*, testified during the magistrate’s hearing that the convicts complained about the crowding and heat below decks. As we have seen, the convicts also complained about their rations and allowance of water. Whether these were the cause of the outbreak or not, it seems that the uprising was planned at least a week before – several convicts testified to this.

According to officials who appeared before Magistrate Tickell, and press reports that appeared in July, the events were as follows: a group of convicts captured the ship, and murdered Captain Johnstone, the chief and second mates (all Englishmen) together

with a number of the crew. They then ransacked the ship – destroying the log book and register (the convicts’ descriptive roll) – ran the ship aground and landed on the Burmese shore with all the arms and ammunition on board, some rope and canvas (presumably to make shelters) and as many provisions as they could carry. They believed – mistakenly as it turned out – that they had landed in territory as yet untaken by the British. Tickell was informed and sent a party in search of the convicts, who were said to be near a small town called Yé [correct contemporary sp.?]. He was afraid that if the men remained at large, unrest might break out amongst the transported convicts already in the provinces (said to number about two thousand). Yet the most worrisome aspect of the mutiny for him was the fact that these were not ordinary convicts, but ‘Seikhs, Pathans, Rohillas and the like’. As such, recapturing them was no simple matter. Meanwhile, rumours of their whereabouts abounded.

The escaped convict party quickly assumed the proportions of a military campaign. One of the convicts – Soor Singh – placed himself in charge, putting on the captain’s coat and boots, and the gold necklace, sword and sash belonging to the *subadar* of the convict guard, and took on his title. He armed six other convicts, who wore the military guard’s ‘caps and accoutrements’, referring to them as ‘his sepoys’. They waded from the ship to the beach, where they all assembled, Soor Singh sitting before them in a chair. Thinking that they were in Burmese country, the convicts made their way to the ‘Burma Rajah’ (Gyoug Gyouk, check sp.) and offered him their services against the British. I will take up the story in the words of Kurrim Singh, a convict who turned informer against his shipmates, according to his testimony before the district magistrate’s court:

They all went into the Rajah’s Cutcherry. The Rajah salaamed and gave Soor Singh a chair to sit on, there were several interpreters there. The Rajah asked Soor Singh where he had come from and where he was going to. Soor Singh said he was a sikh from Lahore and had come with 175 men to help the Burma Rajah. They had some conversation and the Rajah wishing, as he said, to call all the rest of Soor Singh’s men, Soor Singh gave him one of his party to shew [sic] where they were and the Rajah sent 25 armed Burmese with him. Scarcely had the man gone out, when Soor Singh’s eyes alighted on a written piece of paper with a Court[’]s [i.e. East India Company] seal impressed on it which was stuck against the wall. He instantly took the alarm, jumped to his feet and rushed out of the House with his 5 men.

In the gun fight all six convicts – including the leader Soor Singh - were killed, and over the next few days, most of the remaining convicts were brought in. A couple of dozen remained unaccounted for, presumed drowned, starved or mauled by wild animals.

So who were the *Clarissa* convicts? The fact that the convict mutineers destroyed the ship indent (descriptive register) is a boon, for copies of ship indents were always kept in Calcutta as well as being sent to the penal settlements. Most of these – including the *Clarissa* roll - survive in the Bengal Judicial Proceedings for us to see. But there is a second list too, for at the time, once they realized their copy of the list was missing, officials in Burma made a new list from details given by the convicts themselves. This provides a unique insight into convicts' perceptions of the crime for which they were transported, and gives details of former occupation not usually recorded by officials in the presidencies. The first – official – list does not seem to show anything strange. The convicts were transported for the crimes of dacoity (gang murder) or murder, or the rather woolly offence of thuggee (Singha, 1995). There was nothing unusual about this, for these were the crimes for which convicts were usually transported. There is only one exception: Mohomed Buksh who was convicted of 'wounding with intent to murder Mr R.P. Jenkins, Assistant Commissioner of Leia by striking him on the head and shoulder with an iron hammer'. Several other convicts came from Leia (check sp.) – and a large majority from Lahore and Allahabad. I need to do more research on what was going on in these places in the early 1850s. I suspect that although this is not made clear by the crimes for which they were sentenced, at least some of these convicts were caught up in the anti-colonial skirmishes going on in the region at this time. The second – convict – list does not mention 'thuggee', only 'dacoity', which perhaps tells us something about convict perceptions (or confirms the vagueness) of the offence. Neither is the list suggestive that any of the convicts had been soldiers, except for the informer Kurrim Singh, though we should remember that the leaders of the mutiny – who may have had military backgrounds - were all killed, so they are not on that list. The original ship indents did not record occupation. Incidentally, in the convict-generated list, Mohomed Buksh's crime appears as 'murder' – an attempt on the convict himself to present himself in a more flattering light, or the contraction of a clerk under pressure? Only about thirty of the convicts were from Bengal, something also worthy of further exploration.

During the sessions court hearings, a story of huge divisions between the convicts on board the *Clarissa* emerges. At least some of the convicts were motivated by a desire to escape beyond British control, in offering themselves in service against them. Convict Shaik Sooiah told Magistrate Tickell that Soor Singh called out: 'The Feringees [foreigners / the British] are flying – the ship is ours'; another convict who claimed he was unconcerned in the outbreak – Beejah - deposed that he told them 'you shall be taken to the Burma Raja's and there be all free men'. The non-Sikh convicts like Beejah (who referred to themselves in a rather eclectic way as Bengalis, Deswallies [check

contemporary sp.?) or Hindustanis) all claimed that they had nothing to do with the mutiny, which they said was the work of the Sikhs and some of the Muslims. They were kept separate from the others, and after the mutiny were imprisoned below deck by the Sikhs, and given even less water than before. When the ship ran aground, the mutineers made them carry their luggage. Cassee Barah put it like this:

None of us Bengallees had anything to do with the outbreak we were nearly murdered ourselves and kept confined after the outbreak till we came to the shore, where we were forced to land and carry the Sikhs['] burden, till they went away across the river and we all gave ourselves up to the first Burmese who came up.

It is perhaps notable that the self-appellation 'Bengali' crossed religious lines, for according to the descriptive roll, about a third of the Bengali convicts were Muslims themselves.

This brings us on to a further point: the aims of convict mutineers. We have seen some glimpses of this in convict dreams of sailing for Mecca and China, or fleeing to territories beyond British control. In a number of cases, convicts testified that they knew they were dicing with death, but thought the risk worthwhile. There is no doubt that at least some of the mutinies – like that on board the *Clarissa* – can be conceptualized as anti-colonial acts. Revenge was a further linked factor. The convicts on the *General Wood*, according to Governor Butterworth, repeatedly threatened the wife of Lieutenant Seymour, in charge of the guard on board, stating that had she been the wife of the deputy superintendent of police in Hong Kong (Mr Caldwell), they would have 'chopped her into pieces'. Yet this mutiny was a story of unity of purpose in going to China. A piece of 'Chinese writing', rather like the sailors' Round Robins described by Rediker (1987) found on one of the convicts was translated as follows:

If any of us should die, the death of such person is to be made known to the survivors.

If any of us should succeed in procuring a boat the same is to be made known to all of us.

None of us are to leave the Island [Pulo Oly – check contemp. sp.? an Island to the S.E. of Cambodia] until we have fed and lived well so as not to be recognized as convicts when we get to China.

When I go to China, no one save God will know who I am.

We are to share alike in every thing, if we procure food we are to share alike.

If one of us procure[s] a boat the same is to be made known to all of us, that we may go together.

We all swear to assist and stand by one another to the last.

God only besides ourselves shall know our actions and what is in our possession.

Nevertheless, hierarchies on board ship were a potential source of divisions, and there is some evidence that convicts who enjoyed various privileges were targeted by the *Clarissa* mutineers. The convict Bunkur Doss had been appointed overseer whilst in Alipur Jail, and he had reported several of the men for bad conduct. He told Magistrate Tickell that he had been uninvolved in the mutiny: 'I was up on deck every day and better off than the rest I had no cause to join in the tumult.' However, his position in the penal hierarchy made him vulnerable. 'I now feared for my life,' he said. It is clear though that the unfettered working convicts on deck were crucial to the success of the seizure of the ship. A witness at the supreme court trial – Chief Officer James Squires – wrote that there were often fights amongst convicts about their provisions. These sorts of divisions are echoed in other mutinies; some of the *Freak* convicts for instance claimed to have been 'slave[s] of the convicts' after the ship was taken.

The convict-turned-informer, Kurrim Singh, is an interesting character. Informing was officially encouraged in all the penal settlements, and convicts commonly offered rewards or remission of sentence for turning against their fellow men. Mutiny plots sometimes came to light when convict informers made their intentions known to one of the officers on board. In the case of the *Recovery* (1846), for instance, convict Husa Bulla reported that the convicts awaiting embarkation in Bombay County Jail were planning to seize their ship. Informing was an integral part of colonial penal strategies, and convicts who warned the authorities of imminent attacks were well rewarded with release from fetters, hard labour on the roads or even remission of sentence. Local communities too were integrated into the system, and offered not insubstantial rewards for the capture of escaped offenders. It seemed likely to me – from knowing a little about convict informers like him - before I even came to the trial depositions that Kurrim Singh had been at the centre of events, and that the colonial authorities in Burma wanted to believe his innocence and thereby construct a plausible version of events in the face of a mass of confusing and contradictory evidence. How else to make sense of the testimony of almost over a hundred witnesses? Tickell himself wrote on submitting the papers to Calcutta:

In these proceedings, I trust all irregularities and omissions will be leniently considered. I have no precedent to guide me. I have proceeded with it in conformity to the General Regulation of the Company's Court in committing to the Sessions. The difficulties are the magnitude of the case,

its complexity, incessant interruptions, and the fact that the matters alleged have not been investigated by the police.

If only Tickell had had the original descriptive roll in his possession, for it listed Kurrim Singh as a 'desperate character requires to be carefully watched', the only convict on board so described.

During the trial, a number of witnesses spoke of Kurrim Singh's pivotal role during the mutiny. Sheik Kurwodeen, a sepoy guard on board, testified that he was one of the self-elected convict *jemadars* (head overseers). The convict Bunkur Doss (who had been an overseer in Alipur Jail) stated that he was one of the worst of the convicts, and that his word was 'good for nothing'. A third man, Chatoo, claimed that he had planned the whole thing days beforehand, and had been 'second in command' after Soor Singh. According to reports of the trial in the *Bengal Hurkaru*, Kurrim Singh said that he had been an artilleryman in the 5th Company at Rangoon, and understood a little Burmese. Yet Magistrate Tickell wrote during the Amherst Sessions that the evidence against him was insufficient and motivated only by the desire for revenge on the part of the other convicts. This was clearly not the case. Superintendent of Alipur Jail, H. Fergusson, wrote after the trial: 'It is now well known that he was one of the principal instigators of the lamentable tragedy ... He is a cunning, clever, intriguing desperate scoundrel and became approver against the men he had instigated and led.' The other convicts had, apparently, sworn to take their revenge and murder him. Fergusson kept him away from them in prison, and recommended that he be sent to a different penal settlement. It was agreed that whilst the others be shipped to Malacca, he be sent to Singapore, and the resident councillor there informed of who he was.

I mentioned above that one of the convict guards testified that the captain of the *Clarissa* had made rather unusual arrangements in the keeping of the ship's weaponry, and had even employed one of the convicts to clean his swords and muskets. He added that the *subadar* of the guard had complained to the captain, who told him 'to hold his tongue'. It turns out that – despite the explicit warning noted on the descriptive roll - this man was none other than convict-turned-informer Kurrim Singh. I suspect that the captain had a sneaking admiration for some of his convict charge, for at least some of them were military men or in the words of one convict 'fine-looking fellows'. If this was the case, it was certainly a costly mistake.

On a former occasion, another group of convicts from Allahabad seized the *Kalleegunga*, on which they were being shipped to Calcutta for transportation. On board was a 'Sikh general', Narain Singh, and two of his subordinates, who had been sentenced for treason in the Punjab. Although three guards were killed during the affray, Narain

Singh and two others, Nutha and Janna, had their capital sentences commuted to life transportation (in effect their original sentence was to be carried out). The remaining twenty-two men (of the original thirty-nine transportees) were also sentenced to their original punishments. This mutiny is interesting, for colonial notions of the manly, loyal conduct of Europeans in contrast to the weak, treacherous native was turned on its head. The Europeans on board had simply fled, one man Sergeant Cunningham jumping overboard leaving his wife and two children behind. Captain H.M. Nation in charge of the guard much regretted 'the disgrace cast on the Europeans' character' by such acts. Narain Singh, on the other hand, had behaved with impeccable manners. Mary Ann Cunningham said that when the other convicts suggested that they kill her Narain Singh had said that because she had two young children she should be spared: 'He then turned to me and said you are my mothers and fathers it is not to take your life that we are doing this it is to get away with our own lives.' The judges certainly sympathized with the treatment Narain Singh – 'a man of caste and rank' - had received, locked on a single chain with ordinary prisoners of low caste. His use of the expression 'subkut o joweer nurdee' ('successful bravery' [check correct transliteration]) to describe his escape was well understood by the British.

These types of assumptions could be fatal. Kurrin Sing (and speculatively other convicts on board the *Clarissa*) was configured in relation to his military rank and social standing rather than his conviction and prior record. The privileges as such accorded to him provided him with the chance to mutiny. Such colonial configurations on the basis of class/caste were also clearly informed by (and fed into) contemporary ideas about racial characteristics, in particular that of the martial castes (Robb, 1997). In a similar way, investigations into mutinies among Straits convicts sailing to mainland India pointed the finger of blame at crews' inability to read the criminals in their charge. As the second mate of the *Harriet Scott*, Thomas Jones, put it: 'the crew used to say that the convicts looked too innocent to do any harm.' The secretary to government Bombay, W. Norris, wrote

Persons unacquainted with the Malayan character, are apt to suppose from his generally dull and phlegmatic countenance, that the Malay is a harmless and not unwilling slave, to be coerced with ease, beaten with impunity and requiring no particularly vigilant oversight. You are of course aware that, a more dangerous error cannot be fallen into, especially in the case of Malayan convicts, who are generally persons of piratical and wandering habits, ardently fond of liberty, impatient of a restraint, reckless of their own lives, and those of others, courageous, hardy, revengeful and prepared at whatever cost, to resent a blow and to have recourse to any violence or stratagem to recover their freedom.

In future, commanders of vessels from the Straits were warned not to place the slightest confidence in the convicts. Malays, it was said, prized freedom and were sensitive to both good treatment and to injury or insult. Norris continued: 'a blow is rarely if ever forgiven'. Chinese convicts, moreover, were 'active, earnest and energetic', and would use their 'cunning and connivance' to assist them.

The Sikh convicts on board the *Clarissa* denied the Bengalis' claims that they had led the mutiny. Assah Singh deposed: 'I came all the way from Lahore to Calcutta a thousand coss if I had wishes to rebel outbreak from confinement could I not have done so more easily during that long journey on land than at sea?' He was one of the four convicts sentenced to death, and apparently 'sneered' throughout the Supreme Court trial. When the sentence was read out, the press reported that he gave a 'sneering contemptuous laugh which made one shudder'. Convicts were free to cross-examine witnesses in court, and sometimes did so with remarkable aplomb. Yet in other cases, they refused to take part in the procedure. Bela, being asked to question a witness in the court said: 'I am not a prophet to know what to ask ... It is your Lordships['] business to question him here if I met him the Bazaar I would ask him.' Others had a clear sense of how they would get justice. Hameer Rhadoo of the *Virginia* said in court: 'God is above and your Lordships below.'

Conclusion

Indian convict ship mutinies in the mid-nineteenth century were dramatic and complex events that can be rendered historically meaningful in multiple ways. They are suggestive of colonial limitations on board transportation vessels in relation to the confinement, employment and provisioning of convicts. In this, as in life in the penal settlements more generally, there was a wide breach between the discourses and practices of convict transportation (Anderson, 2000). Further, these mutinies are suggestive of the existence of a particular regime of authority at sea, which in seizing ships convicts simultaneously mimicked and inverted. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in their divisions and hierarchies mutinies dispel simplistic notions of 'a' convict identity or 'the' convict experience of transportation. This, I think, has potentially important ramifications for readings of subaltern studies more generally, for who was - or rather was rendered - subaltern, and how they played out that role, moved both within and beyond common experiences of incarceration and transportation.

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