

Far from Home, But at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry

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Abstract

This article revisits the life and times of Indian migrant workers in Persia/Iran during the first half of the twentieth century, and discusses their contributions to the founding, development and eventual consolidation of the Persian/Iranian oil industry. A number of factors that shaped this experience are investigated. They include the geographic and ethno-religious origins of Indian labourers; the policies adopted by the oil company (APOC), labour agencies and the Government of India to recruit workers and regulate their working conditions and terms of contract; and the lived experience of the workers once they were hired and began working in the Persian/Iranian oil industry.

Across nearly half a century, Indian workers in the Persian/Iranian oil industry faced a variety of labour experiences ranging from coerced recruitment as indentured workers during wartime, to wage labour with a negotiated contract and protection under colonial labour laws. I will discuss how these workers responded to the various recruitment policies, the demanding working conditions and labour discipline imposed on them, their remuneration and wage-structures, and their living conditions and housing situation.

Records of the lengthy presence of Indian workers in the oil industry provide us with numerous stories of contestation, resistance and negotiations for better working and living conditions. Ultimately, the story of Indian migrant workers is also a story of accommodating within an emerging multinational corporation. I situate the history of migrant labour agencies within the framework of colonial labour practices. By examining the workers' encounter with multiple class, ethnic and territorial identities, I survey the changing relations of both solidarity and discord between Indian migrant workers and indigenous Iranian workers.²

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Introduction

The course of history in the Persian Gulf, an area rich in spatial networks, commercial associations and a 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 the expansion of British hegemony, Indian subjects of the Empire landed in Persia as soldiers, with rifles in their hands. However, by the discovery of oil in southern Persia in 1908, Indian skilled and semi-skilled workers outnumbered the 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 was then confronted with, was the scarcity of skilled and semi-skilled labour 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 labour could be supplied by local tribal-pastoralist and village-based labouring poor, the skilled and semi-skilled 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 forty years. Indian migrant workers formed their own social and residential communities in major Iranian oil towns, and constituted a distinctive and significant labour 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 labour in India. Pioneer researchers on transoceanic Indian indentured labour migration have published extensively on 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.³ Singha and Tetzlaff have studied Indian indentured labour in Mesopotamia and northern Persian Gulf; Seccombe and Lawless examined

and Yaddulah Basht Bavi helped me imagine the old Abadan. I am indebted to them for their support. I thank Willem van Schendel, Kaveh Ehsani and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments. Finally, I would like to thank Reza Masoom, Kathinka Sinha Kerkhoff and Jurriaan Bendien for their valued assistance.

³ Kenneth L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); Hugh Tinker, *New System of Slavery 1830–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Brij V. Lal, 'Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians', *Journal of Pacific History* (1983); P.C. Emmer (ed.), *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1986); Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995); Prabhu Mohapatra, 'Following Custom? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880–1920', in *India's Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c. 1600–c. 2000*, ed. Behal P. Rana and Marcel van der Linden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173–202.

the migration of Indian labour 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 in the era of British colonial rule have only rarely been described.⁴

Departing for Persia

In December 1907, twenty Indian cavalrymen landed at the port of Mohammareh (later 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.⁵ Oil was discovered at Masjed Suleiman in Southwest Persia five months later. The use of Indian cavalrymen by the young Persian/Iranian oil industry was a precursor to decades of employment of Indian skilled and semi-skilled 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 company⁶ became an international consortium.

In 1901, William N. D'Arcy, an Australian entrepreneur supported by the British legation in Tehran, obtained a fantastic concession in Persia. He gained monopoly rights to 'search for, obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable trade, carry away and sell natural gas, petroleum' and all 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'.⁷ 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 skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour for the industry was poorly regulated. Unskilled labour was chiefly recruited from Bakhtiyari peasants and pastoral nomads living

⁴ Radhika Singha, 'Finding Labour from India for the War in Iraq: The Jail Porter and Labour Corps, 1916–1920', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 2 (2007): 412–45; Stefan Tetzlaff, 'The Turn of the Gulf Tide: Empire, Nationalism, and South Asian Labour Migration to Iraq, c. 1900–1935', *International Labour and Working-Class History* 79: 7–27; I.J. Seccombe and R.I. Lawless, 'Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910–50', *International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (1986): 548–74.

⁵ Arnold T. Wilson, *S.W. Persia. Letters and Diary of a Young Political Officer. 1907–1914* (London: Readers Union Limited with arrangement with Oxford University Press, 1942), 22.

⁶ The name of the company changed from 'Anglo Persian Oil Company' to 'Anglo Iranian Oil Company' after the government in Tehran decided on 21 March 1935 to change the name of the country from Persia to Iran.

⁷ J.C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near East and Middle East: A Documentary Record* (New York: D. van Nostrand and Company, 1956), vol. 1, 251.

Table 1. Employment in the Anglo-Persian/Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1910–50

Year	Iranian	Indian	European	Other	Total
1910	1,362	158	40	146	1,706
1915	2,203	979	80	187	3,449
1920	8,447	3,616	244	35	12,342
1925	15,820	4,890	994	7201	28,905
1930	20,095	2,411	1,191	7,549	31,246
1935	25,240	954	1,035	119	27,348
1940	26,484	1,158	1,056	15	28,713
1945	60,366	2,498	2,357	240	65,461
1950	72,681	1,744	2,725	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).

in the region adjacent to the oilfield. Indian migrant workers comprised the main trunk of the semi-skilled and skilled workforce (Table 1).⁸

The number of Indian migrant workers grew from 157 in 1910 (representing about 9 per cent of a total workforce of 1,706 at that time) to a peak of 4890 workers in 1925 (about 16 per cent of a total workforce of 28,905) (Figure 1).

The early cluster of Indian migrant workers who joined the Persian oil industry were 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.⁹

In the early years of its operation, the oil company was mainly concerned with establishing the basic infrastructure required to supply oil to the market. Training facilities for local labour 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 semi-skilled labour by employing large numbers of migrant workers, mostly from India, both in clerical and skilled or semi-skilled manual professions.¹⁰ As I will show in what follows, this policy changed when the industry grew bigger. Employing labour came to be

⁸ For a detailed study of early labour recruitment in the oil industry, see Touraj Atabaki, 'From Amaleh (Labour) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry', *International Labour and Working-Class History* 84 (fall) (2013): 159–75.

⁹ Archive of Anglo-Persian Oil Company (British Petroleum Archive), ARC 176326; George Thomson, 'Abadan in its Early Days', *Nat* 7, no. 4 (1931), July: 15.

¹⁰ I.J. Seccombe and R.I. Lawless, 'Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910–50', *International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (1986): 549.

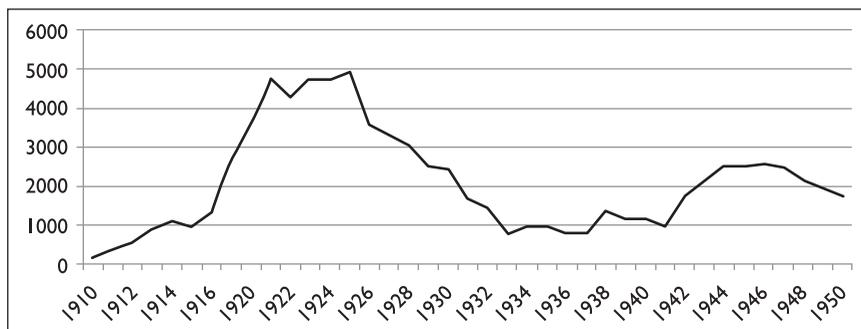


Figure 1. Indian Employment in the Anglo-Persian/Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1910–50

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).

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 labour activism aimed at improving the situation of workers.

In India, the British Indian trading company Shaw Wallace & Co. Ltd was the intermediary agent recruiting labour 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 equipped 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.’¹¹ Shaw Wallace worked closely with the Burma Oil Company and APOC, and its mission as labour recruitment agency lasted until 1926, when APOC decided to take over the task and recruit Indian labour via its office in Bombay. In India, Shaw Wallace was the sole agent of these oil companies, providing various services in addition to labour recruitment. Charles Greenway originally worked in the oil department of Shaw Wallace as an agent of the Burma Oil Company in India before he joined the Persian oil industry in 1910 as managing director and became chairman of APOC from 1914 to 1927.¹² Figure 2 shows a construction site of the Gach-qaraguli (Gachsaran) Road in 1909.

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 labour source. Using a free-contract system, Shaw Wallace

¹¹ J.B. Backhouse, ‘Oil—1904–1928’, in *A History of Shaw Wallace & Co. and Shaw Wallace & Co. Ltd.*, ed. Harry Townsend (Calcutta: Sree Saraswati Press Ltd., 1965), 46.

¹² R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 1, the Developing Years 1901–1932* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 12; J.H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum, Vol. 2, the Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.



Figure 2. Construction of the Gach-qaraguli (Gachsaran) Road, 1909

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

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 1890s.¹³ In 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 Yangon), 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 Shites Muslims. It was known as the ‘Rangoony Mosque’, no doubt a reference to a substantial Burmese population in Abadan (Figure 3).

Shaw Wallace recruited not only Indian migrant workers from Burma for work in the Persian oil industry. Through subsidiary or subcontractors’ offices,

¹³ 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.



Figure 3. Rangoony Mosque in Abadan, 2009

Source: Touraj Atabaki's Private Collection.

it also recruited both skilled and semi-skilled workers in Bombay and Karachi. Subcontractors such as 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ All workers who applied for the announced positions first had to go through a qualifying examination. Those recruited in the 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 per cent of their first month's pay. Those who had previously worked for the oil company in Persia and returned to India in less than two years, were required to pay an admission fee of ₹10.¹⁶ The same rule applied to workers hired for household and domestic services,

¹⁴ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 68877.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ During the War period, the average salary of Indian workers was between ₹80 and ₹100 per month. In the same period, the salary of Iranian workers was on average about one-third of the salary of Indian workers. *Ibid.*

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).¹⁷

When the Abadan oil refinery was first being built, from 1910 to 1913, 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 labour 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 1912.¹⁸ 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 per cent, and thereby became the major owner of the company.¹⁹ 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 thirty years. Oil suddenly became a strategic military commodity in the British Empire.²⁰

As the Persian oil industry expanded its operations during the First World War, the need for an adequate and constant supply of labour became urgent. Unsurprisingly, the whole question of how to allocate and maintain the workforce became a priority in the APOC policy, and the British Raj became directly involved in administering the migration of Indian workers to the oil industry. APOC claimed that the biggest obstacle in obtaining labour for the Persian oil industry was a formality in the Indian Emigrations Act of 1883, which restricted labour migration to specified destinations, which did not include Persia.²¹ 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 labour:

Owing to the non-existence of such [skilled] labour 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 labourers of many kinds, such as riveters, engine drivers, assembling machine men, iron and brass moulders, solders, core makers and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 274–304.

¹⁹ Marian (Kent) Jack, 'The Purchase of the British Government's Shares in the British Petroleum Company 1912–1914', *Past and Present* 39 (April 1968): 139–68.

²⁰ Agreement with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, Limited: Navy. Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1914, Cd. 7419.

²¹ Indian Emigrations Act of 1883 in *Royal Commission on Labour: Foreign Reports*, Vol. II. The Colonies and the Indian Empire. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, C. 6795-XI, 1892, 234; Stefan Tetzlaff, *Entangled Boundaries: British India and the Persian Gulf Region during the Transition from Empires to Nation States, c. 1880–1935*, (Berlin: Magisterarbeit, 2009), 30.

others. At the present time the number of Indian employees in Abadan and the oil fields is about 1,020. 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.²²

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 are 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.²³

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.²⁴

²² National Archive of India, ARC. 332-12. 1915; Tetzlaff, *Entangled Boundaries*, 68–70.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For the Anglo-Russian 1907 Convention, see Firouz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) Chapter 7; for a detailed study of this convention, and the reaction of the Iranians, see Mahmoud Mahmoud, *Traikh Ravabet-e Siyasi Iran va Engelis dar Qarn Nouzdahom Miladi*, vol. 8 (Tehran: Eqbal, 1954), 2228–66.

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 are 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 are not likely to be frightened by requirements of the Act, which are not of harassing nature.²⁵

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', 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'.²⁶

The dispute between APOC and the Government of India about whether Persia should be a legal destination for Indian labour 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, the Government of India 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 labour scarcity.²⁷ APOC remained very insistent about the importance of a continuing labour supply from India. If that labour 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 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

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Stefan Tetzlaff, *op. cit.*, 72.

the war, dearness of living, and coercive methods that they say we use in order to retain their services.²⁸

APOC's concern was 'fully appreciated' by the army when 'a special order was issued to effect that no labour *ex* Abadan to be employed by any Military or Naval unit'.²⁹

During the War, APOC was not only troubled by the problem of skilled workers deserting the Persian oil industry but the scarcity of the supply of unskilled labour 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,³⁰ at least in the early stage of the War. The proximity of the oilfields and refinery to the war front also caused local unskilled labour to leave the oil company. As the British forces advanced in Mesopotamia, and were active at the Baghdad front, a new labour market with more favourable 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 (six days ago) some 200 men cleared off and this morning Abadan have rung up to say that a similar number went yesterday...I suppose it is the fall of Baghdad, which it so some extent responsible for this sudden extra demand for coolies by the [British] government.³¹

Adding coolies to the list of their preferred recruits was a new chapter in APOC's labour policy. The Indian Labour Corp was invited to join their workforce in Persia.³² In October 1917, when APOC had already accommodated a 300-strong Indian Labour Corp 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 were possible our existing Indian Corps to be increased, we imagine it would save having two separate organizations.³³

The response of the Government of India to APOC's petition was not favourable. About seven months earlier, on 12 March 1917, the Government had

²⁸ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71754; Works Manager, Abadan to Strick, Scott & Co., 12 May 1916.

²⁹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338; Thomson, 'Abadan during the World War', *Naft* 8, no. 5 (1932), September: 9.

³⁰ For an eyewitness account of the famine and epidemic spreading over Iran during the First World war, see Movarrekh al-Dowleh Sepehr, *Iran dar Jang-e Bozorg 1914-1918* (Tehran: Adib, 1957).

³¹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 68779, Strick, Scott & Co. to Wilson, 7 October 1916.

³² British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338; Thomson, 'Abadan during the World War', 9.

³³ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 68799, Strick, Scott & Co. to Civil Commissioner, Basra, 24 October 1917.

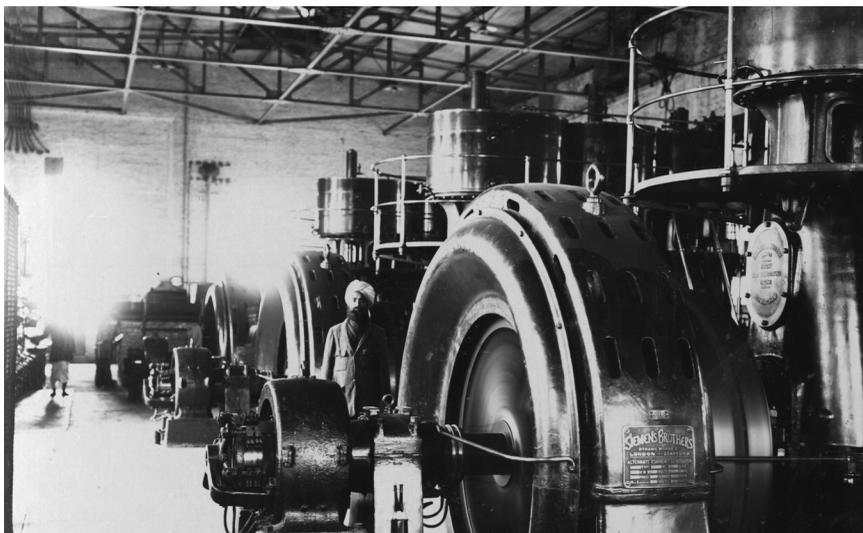


Figure 4. Power Station, Abadan Refinery, 1921

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

already suspended all unskilled labour migration from India, except to Ceylon and Malaysia.³⁴

Nevertheless, recruitment of migrant labour 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 (Figure 4). Chittagonian workers worked in harbour engineering and naval 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 dhobis (washerman), while Goans served as cooks and servants.³⁵

According to the signed contract, migrant Indian employees were not allowed to take their family to Persia. While this was of major concern to some workers who wanted to bring their family the oil company considered the ban on family

³⁴ Radhika Singha, 'The Great War and a "Proper" Passport for the Colony: Border-crossing in British India, c.1882–1922', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 3 (2013): 311.

³⁵ Michael Edward Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage in Western Ways of Work: Industrial Education and the Containment of Nationalism in Anglo-Iranian and ARAMCO, 1923–1963*, PhD thesis (Graduate School-New Brunswick, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2008), 62; Rasmus Christian Elling, 'On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City', in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, ed. Ulrike Freitag (Forthcoming); Henry Longhurst, *Adventure in Oil* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1959), 72–3.

reunion as strictly non-negotiable, 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 ‘*Shahanshah* [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.³⁶

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 labour 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 labour, extensively practised during the War. As I will discuss in more detail, the main reason for this change in labour policy was the gradual escalation of labour protests among Indian migrant workers.

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

The withdrawal of this concession is extremely detrimental to the interests of the Company who have been obliged to rely on India not only for unskilled but for skilled labour 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 labour costs very much increased but there are more frequent changes in the personnel which it is to be avoided as far as possible.³⁷

³⁶ National Archive of Iran, File no. 240017531, 17 December 1927.

³⁷ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 54506. Letter Book ARC. 9, H.E. Nichols to R.I. Watson, 9 May 1921.



Figure 5. Persian Trainees of the Electrical Squad with their Indian Coach Masjed Suleiman, 1926

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

A new Emigration Act was introduced in 1922. Other developments in the employment policy of APOC followed. The end of the wartime policy and the prohibition of indentured labour system at first motivated APOC to become directly involved with workforce recruitment. Thus, APOC opened its own labour recruitment office in Bombay, and began to tap the local labour market for its Persian industry. In November 1925, APOC instructed Shaw Wallace & Co. to end its labour recruitment mission for the Persian oil industry in India as of January 1926. APOC said it expected 'lowered requirements for Indian labour' by replacing Indian labour with locally trained Persians.³⁸ Figure 5 shows a group of Persian Trainees of the Electrical Squad with their Indian Coach, Masjed Suleiman, in 1926. But 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 the oil concession was granted in 1901. According to the 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

³⁸ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 54499. Letter nos. 209–210, H.E. Nicolas to Shaw Wallace & Co, 3 December 1925.

technical staff, such as the managers, engineers, borers and foremen'.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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 4,598 non-Iranians working for the Oil Company. Although the Oil Company, according to the concession [of 1901] preserved its right to employ non-Iranian labour for its technical careers, nevertheless, all necessary measures should be made to replace the entire non-Iranian with the Iranian national.⁴¹

By the late 1920s, training Persian labour in APOC workshops had become normal. Persians were instructed by Indian engineers in what would today 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, boiler makers, welders (electric and acetylene) and instrument makers'.⁴²

In 1933, the Persian government cancelled the D'Arcy concession, and offered APOC a new agreement that was more favourable 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.⁴³ 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

³⁹ J.C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near East and Middle East: A Documentary Record* (New Haven: D. Van Nostrand Company Inc., 1956), 249.

⁴⁰ National Library and Archive of Iran, ARC 240014788, Sadiq al-Saltaneh to the Persian Charge d'Affaire in London, 11 December 1910.

⁴¹ National Library and Archive of Iran, ARC 297/34982, Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Endowment and Education, 9 August 1927.

⁴² Dobe, *A Long Slow*, 52; J.W. Williamson, *In a Persian Oil Field: A Study in Scientific and Industrial Development* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), 156. For more on Persianization of labour in APOC, see Tetzlaff, *Entangled Boundaries*, 75–87.

⁴³ British Petroleum Archive, ARC133277, January 1938. Laurence Lockhart, *Unpublished Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Relations Between Persian (Iranian) Government 1918–1946*.

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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

Taking into account the combined effect of all these developments—new employment policies, political pressure from the Iranian government, and increased labour activism (initially among Indian migrant labour, 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.⁴⁷

The outbreak of the Second World War once again powerfully boosted the demand of oil. A new oil boom resulted, and the number of Indian migrant workers in the oil industry grew by 100 per cent, reaching 2,498 men in 1945. However, in the end, the Indian independence movement together with the campaign to nationalize the Iranian oil industry caused the Indian migrant labour community in Iran to dwindle. When the Iranian oil industry was nationalized in March 1951, the community of Indian migrant workers splintered. 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 Triple City

In her seminal study of colonial urbanization in Morocco, Janet Lughod refers to Rabat as a dual city, with sharply segregated urban spaces of the colonizer and the colonized.⁴⁸ 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

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁶ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 72614.

⁴⁷ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 54374, ARC 54375.

⁴⁸ Janet Abu-Lughod *Rabat, Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 374. For more study on colonial urban development, see Anthony D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2007); Mariam Dossal, *Imperial Designs and Indian Realities: The Planning of Bombay City, 1845–1875* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991).

colonists deliberately cultivated a segment of the indigenous elite, who served as intermediaries between the colonizers and the colonized.⁴⁹

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. 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 1922.⁵⁰ 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,⁵¹ of which about half—17,370 men—worked at the oil refinery.⁵²

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 seven 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: six working days per week, from nine to twelve hours per day, depending on the season. Work typically started at six o'clock in the morning and ended at six o'clock in the evening during the winter, and continued from six o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon during the summer. It was only after the several labour 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 one hour for lunch.⁵³ In the early days, the oil company designated Sunday as an off day. In later years, the rest period started at noon on Thursday, and included Friday.

At first, APOC offered temporary housing exclusively to its 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 made⁵⁴—APOC's European employees were accommodated in brick villas and bungalows surrounded by gardens. These houses were built at the north-western 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 neighbourhood was constructed for Indian clerks and artisans. The refinery was in fact a 'buffer

⁴⁹ Nezar Al Sayyad and Mrinalini Rajagopalan, 'Colonial City', in *Encyclopaedia of Urban Studies*, ed. Ray Hutchison (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010), 166–71. See also Eva T. van Kempen, 'The Dual City and the Poor: Social Polarisation, Social Segregation and Life Chances', *Urban Studies* 31, no. 7 (1994): 995–105.

⁵⁰ British National Archive, FO 371/7818.

⁵¹ H.A. [Due to political reasons, the author opted for H.A. for anonymity], 'Angloprisian Oil Kompany va Joziyat an', *Setareh Sorkh* 2, nos. 7–8 (April 1930): 87. Reidar Visser, *The Gibraltar That Never Was* (www.historiae.org), 6.

⁵² British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71879.

⁵³ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176326; Thomson, 'Abadan in its Early Days', 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.



Figure 6. Parallel long barracks where Indian workers were accommodated in Coolie/Sikh/Indian Lane

Source: Touraj Atabaki's Private Collection

zone' between the Braim and the new neighbourhood. During the early years this new neighbourhood 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 (Figure 6). Each barrack was divided by wall portions into a number of units. Each unit could accommodate several employees or an entire family, if by exception family members were permitted by the company to join the employee. Figure 7 shows New Suburbs built in the 1920s and 1930s in a map of Abadan.

In the early days, Persian recruits either lived in sun-baked 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.⁵⁵ 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 neighbourhoods to Abadan: the Bowardeh area and the Indian Quarter (*kuarter-e hendi-ha*). Bowardeh was constructed to accommodate Persian clerks and skilled

⁵⁵ Williamson, *In a Persian Oil Field*, 14.

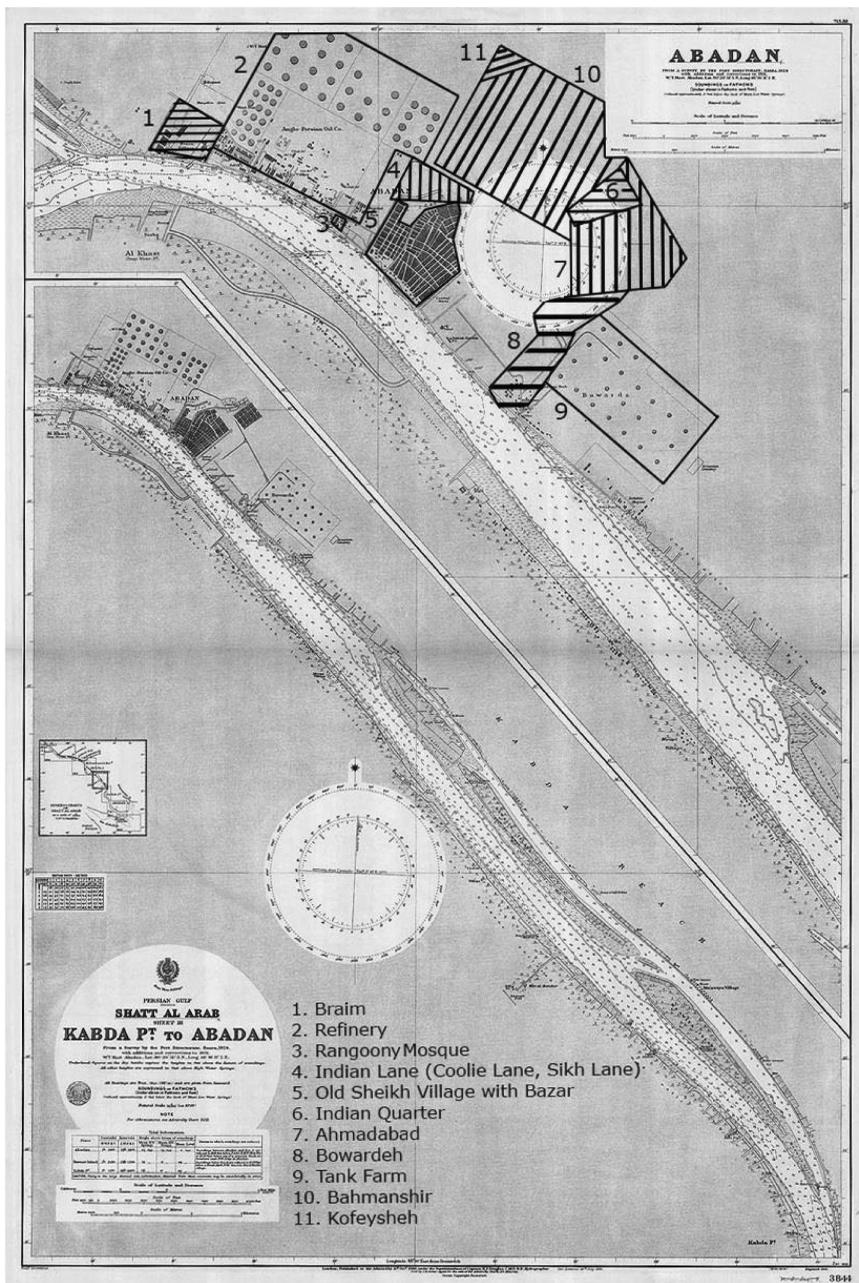


Figure 7. Map of Abadan in 1926 showing New Suburbs built in the 1920s and 1930s
Source: Original map taken from the British Library. Location of new suburbs added by the author.

workers. The Indian Quarter was intended for Indian semi-skilled workers and security agents. Between the two new labour neighbourhoods 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.⁵⁶ 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 neighbourhoods were added to the city, as the oil industry expanded, the refinery was extended, and the employment policy was altered.⁵⁷ Figure 8 shows an APOC Official Admissions Ceremony for High-ranking Indian Employees in Abadan, 1925.



Figure 8. An APOC Official Admissions Ceremony for High-ranking Indian Employees, Abadan, 1925

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

⁵⁶ ‘Abdolali Lahsaiizadeh, *Jameh’shenasi Abadan* (Tehran: Kiyan-Mehr, 2005), 289.

⁵⁷ For the city planning of Abadan, see Mark Crinson, ‘Abadan: Architecture and Planning under the Anglo-Persian Oil Company’, *Planning Perspectives*, 12, no. 3 (1997): 341–60. See also Kaveh Ehsani, ‘Social Engineering and the Contradiction of Modernization in Khuzestan’s Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed Soleyman’, *International Review of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2003): 361–90.

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.⁵⁸ However, mixing across racial borders was 'specifically discouraged, and segregation was held up as the best alternative'.⁵⁹ The APOC archive contains a 1926 memorandum signed by Mr Armstrong, an APOC executive in Abadan, which illustrates this segregation. According to the memorandum, when some Indian clerks at APOC approached Mr 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.⁶⁰

In the 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.⁶¹ 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 labour divided in Khuzestan.⁶²

Labour Activism Encounters Nationalism

The dialectics between nationalism and labour movements during colonial rule in Asia and Africa have been the subject of a few major studies.⁶³ Increasingly, large-scale labour migrations became a feature of imperial social formations. As anti-colonial nationalism gathered steam, there were more and more cases of backlash against migrant workers, including among labour activists and labour movements inspired by nationalist ideas. In many instances, transnational migrant labourers 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

⁵⁸ *APOC Magazine* 4, no. 2, March 1928.

⁵⁹ Reidar Visser, *The Gibraltar That Never Was* (www.historiae.org), 9.

⁶⁰ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71183. 'Item 21; Social Activities', 18 March 1926; 'Item 5; Conference at Fields Manager's Office', 2 April 1926; 'Dossier 12; Social Services Department-Fields', 2 April 1926. Also *Naft* 2, no. 3 (1926). British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71183, 1926.

⁶¹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 68723, M.Y. Young to Strick & Co., 3 March 1921.

⁶² British Petroleum Archive, ARC 71183, 'Social Services Department Fields', 2 April 1926. Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage*, 45.

⁶³ See Fredrick Cooper, 'The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labour Movements in Postwar Africa', *CSST Working Paper 884*, May 1992. <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/51246/480.pdf?sequence=1>

further exploitation. The oil towns of Persia were founded as migrant towns. They accommodated large groups of migrant labourers 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 second-class employees, and treated accordingly. In the Persian oil industry, the social stratification scheme imposed by the British colonial rule contributed to creating nationalist sentiments, both among Indian migrant workers and among the ‘native’ Persians.⁶⁴

There is no reference in APOC records to any major labour 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.⁶⁵ 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 this changed after the First World War. In December 1920, some 3,000 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.⁶⁶ They were soon joined by their Iranian co-workers, 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 it was provoked by some Indian ‘semi-organized’ political agitators.⁶⁷

More recently, other historians have also regarded the Amritsar massacre as the cause of the 1920 Indian workers’ strike.⁶⁸ However, it is doubtful that the Abadan strike of December 1920 can be associated with a massacre, which had occurred more than a year and a half earlier. Such an interpretation would downgrade 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 per cent salary increase demanded by workers illustrates how poorly paid both Indian and Persian workers actually were. The petitions by Persian workers, which were

⁶⁴ Touraj Atabaki, ‘Disgruntled Guests: Iranian Subalterns on the Margin of the Tsarist Empire’, in *The State and the Subaltern. Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 31–52.

⁶⁵ Touraj Atabaki, ‘From “Amaleh” (labour) to “Kargar” (worker)’, 159–75.

⁶⁶ Floor, *Labour Unions*, 28.

⁶⁷ Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 432.

⁶⁸ For example, see Floor, *Labour Unions*, 28.

sent to the government in Tehran all refer to 'poor pay, inadequate facilities, dirty living conditions the lack of compensation in case of disability'.⁶⁹

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 demands that the workers had raised were 'accommodation, married square, medical services, leisure amenities, exchange rate and the sale of discharge certificates of Indian employees'.⁷⁰ It was therefore to be expected that workers' discontent would flare up again. And so it did, eighteen 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 in 1922, recalled the strike as a 'well organised' protest, by 'the skilled artisans, involving about 2,000 Indians'.⁷¹ 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 details the poor working and living conditions of Indians in the APOC industry. The account of Mudliar followed an earlier 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 per cent Indians. There is no restriction in the number of hours worked every day. Neither coal nor ice was supplied to workers until agitation was started. Workers die of sunstroke in summer and pneumonia in winter as little is done to look to their wants and comforts. I request Indian labour 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.⁷²

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, though 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 'there is no certainty of working hours, which are sometimes as long as 10 and 12 hours in a day in all weathers'. The working environment, according to Mudliar, was nothing but 'humiliating'

⁶⁹ National Archive of Iran, File no. 240025870.

⁷⁰ Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 432.

⁷¹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338; Thomson, 'Abadan during the World War', 10.

⁷² Dr Ghore, 'Indian Workers in Persia. Miserable Condition', *Bombay Chronicle*, 10 January 1922. British National Archive, F.O. 371/781. C. Chaqueri (ed.), *The Condition of the Working Class in Iran* (Florence: European Committee for the Defence of Democratic Rights of Workers in Iran, 1978), 196–98, 218. Willem M. Floor, *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran, 1900–1941* (Durham: University of Durham, 1985), 29.



Figure 9. Foundry, Abadan, 1921

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

and ‘unbearable’. He confirmed Dr Ghore’s reference to ‘men dying of sunstroke and pneumonia’ as true.⁷³

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

Living accommodation provided is inadequate and large number of people are huddled tighter in small room, incompletely furnished, by way of furniture and lights, nothing to say of cook houses and latrines, thus making life extremely hard.⁷⁴

Added to these ‘unbearable’ working and living conditions were the steady increase in the prices of essential commodities and high living costs. In Mudliar’s words, 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’.⁷⁵ Figure 9 shows a Foundry in Abadan, 1921.

APOC responded through the British Consul in Mohammareh by denying all the public allegations of Dr Ghore and Mudliar as ‘groundless fabrication’

⁷³ *Bombay Chronicle*, 10 January 1922.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

intended only to justify a salary increase.⁷⁶ 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 2,000 skilled Indian workmen'.⁷⁷ 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'.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ 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.

APOC's Persianization of the workforce intensified after the 1920–22 strikes, which meant a reduction of Indian labour.⁸⁰ This development went together 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 coercive institutions intending to create a modern centralized state. Along with the consolidation of such a political society, there was also the re-emergence of a new anti-colonial nationalism, supported by non-coercive institutions, such as, political parties, guilds and labour unions, cultural associations and private schools.

With the arrival of an urban labour movement in the country's public sphere, organized and non-organized 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 1 May 1929 (international Labour Day), when about 9,000 workers at the Abadan Refinery launched a mass strike, their demands included an increase in wages by 15 per cent; recognition of the workers' union and May Day as a legitimate holiday; reduction of the working day from ten hours to seven hours in the summer, and eight hours in the winter; and complete equality between Indian and Persian employees.⁸¹ The strike was initiated mainly by Persian workers, and Indians

⁷⁶ British National Archive, FO 371/7819.

⁷⁷ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 176338; Thomson, 'Abadan during the World War', 10.

⁷⁸ British National Archive, FO 371/7836. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 433.

⁷⁹ Floor, *Labour Unions*, 32.

⁸⁰ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 54499, 5 November 1925.

⁸¹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 59010. Abadan to London, Telegram 6 May 1929. Ardeshir Avanesian, *Safahati chand az Jonbesh Karigari va Komonisti da Dowran Aval Saltanat Reza Shah (1922–1933)*, *op. cit.*, 75–83. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 68–69. For a detailed study of labour activities aiming to reduce the working day in Iran, see Touraj Atabaki, 'The Comintern, the Soviet Union and Labour Militancy in Interwar Iran', in *Iranian-Russian Encounters. Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London, 2012). For recent studies of the workers' strike in the oil industry in 1929, see Kaveh Bayat, 'With or Without Workers in Reza Shah's Iran', in *The State and the*

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 (scabbing).⁸²

APOC claimed that the strike of May 1929 was nothing but a 'Bolshevik plot', to 'foment intense labour trouble' in the oil industry and 'ultimately ablaze in the southern Persian'.⁸³ However, the national press accused the oil company of downplaying the true cause of the labour discontent:

There seems to be two factors for the strike among the workmen of the Company; firstly 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.... Secondly, [it is] the bad treatment by Company's 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 favour 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 say pay no attention to the Bolshevik propaganda.⁸⁴

The issue of inequality between Indians and Persian workers was raised many times right from the early years of the APOC operation till afterwards. 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.⁸⁵

Why there should be differences between the Indians and Persians while they are both workers? Indian hospital located in the neighbourhood called *Company* is well equipped, while the Persian hospital in the dirty and malodourous neighbourhood of *Sheikh* is nothing [and] lacks all essential equipment.⁸⁶

Subaltern. Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2007), 111–22; Stephanie Cronin, 'Popular Politics and the Birth of Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike', *Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (2010), 699–732.

⁸² Archive of the Islamic Republic of Iran President Office, No. 117, Report by the Head of Khoramshahr Office of Post and Telegraph on Abadan strike (6 My 1929), *Naft dar doreh Reza Shah* (Tehran: Vezarat Farhang va Ershad Eslami, 1999), 101–2. For more study on the 1929 Abadan strike, see Kaveh Bayat, 'With or Without Workers in Reza Shah's Iran: Abadan May 1929', in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London, 2007), 111–12. Stephanie Cronin, 'Popular Politics and the Birth of Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike', *Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (2010), 699–732.

⁸³ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 59010. Abadan to London, Telegram of 6 May 1929.

⁸⁴ *Habl al Matin* 21, 4 June 1929. British Petroleum Archive, ARC 59010.

⁸⁵ Archive of the National Parliament of Iran, Fifth Session, Ref. 5/146/35/13, the Petition Commission, 1924, 1–4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

After Reza Khan (later Reza Shah) rose to power in 1920s, his new government promoted territorial-state nationalism, to glorify the authoritarian modernization programme 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’.⁸⁷

The Persianization of labour in the oil industry was juxtaposed with Iranian endeavours to build a centralized modern state after the First World War.⁸⁸ After a brief military operation led by Reza Khan (both prime minister and commander-in-chief) in 1924–5, 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 Persian nationalism on the oil industry was that pressure was put on APOC to improve working and living conditions in the oil industry, and accelerate Persianization by training indigenous workers and replacing Indians by Persians. On the 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] don’t like the Company. Consequently the public opinion was not in favour of seeing their King as a guest of the Company.⁸⁹

The prevalence of such bitter anti-colonial sentiment among Persian workers vis-à-vis APOC translated itself in a more confrontational stance towards 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 11 March 1928 rumours spread about APOC’s intention to ‘fire 10,000 Iranians, while thousands of Indian and Iraqis are still working for the Oil Company’, members of the Indian working community in Abadan were harassed. The following day, a crowd of Iranian workers

⁸⁷ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 54499, 8 October 1925.

⁸⁸ For the emergence of the political community in Iran during the First World War, see Touraj Atabaki, *Iran and the First World War: Battle of the Great Powers* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 1–7.

⁸⁹ *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, 12 Azar 1307 (3 December 1929). Quoted in Kaveh Bayat, ‘With or Without Workers in Reza Shah’s Iran: Abadan May 1929’, in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London, 2007), 116.

‘congregated in front of the Company’s Labour Office in Abadan and stoned the Office’.⁹⁰

However, the most explicit example of the prevailing nationalist sentiments was during the course of the 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 practising racial discrimination, and there were complaints that its Indian employees ruled over Iranians. In a nocturnal hand-out (*shabnameh*) distributed during this period addressing ‘Our Crowned father, Government and Court Officials’, the Persian 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’.⁹¹ Such propaganda literature, according to Bamberg, was ‘prominent, a ritual prophylactic incantation against malign foreign influence’.⁹²

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 from among Persians (Figure 10). In the opinion of the Persian press, cancelling the



Figure 10. Dhobis at Work, APOC Laundry at Haffar, Abadan, Late 1920s

Source: British Petroleum Archive, Warwick, Britain.

⁹⁰ Archive of the Islamic Republic of Iran President Office, No. 930, Letter from the Consulate of the Imperial Iran in Basreh to Tehran, 11 March 1928. *Naft dar doreh Reza Shah* (Tehran: Vezarat Farhang va Ershad Eslami, 1999), 35–8.

⁹¹ British Petroleum Archive, ARC 59010, Labour Affairs, 15 June 1929.

⁹² Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 78.

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'.⁹³

The Second World War reached Iran in August 1941. It opened a new chapter in the history of the Persian oil industry, characterized by much more labour activism. The new era lasted for ten years. During this period, new labour unions organized large sectors of the workers in the oil industry, and launched strikes and street protests for better working and living conditions. There was not a trace of Indian workers in these campaigns. To the contrary, there are reports of incidents where Indian workers protected by the British army (or Indian soldiers in the British army) clashed with the local people. Probably the majority of British soldiers who guarded the oilfields and refinery in southern Iran were Indian. This situation in due course soured relations between Indian and Iranian workers. 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 the Indian and Persian communities, with casualties and large losses of property.⁹⁴

Events such as the Bahmanshir incident were coloured by sectarian features, and had ethnic and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, they are correctly analysed as being rooted in 'social inequality and spatial coercion'.⁹⁵ The experience of social inequality helped the Iranian government to advance indomitably to its ultimate goal: the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran. On 15 March 1951 the Iranian Parliament voted for the nationalization of the oil industry, and six months later, all European and some Indian employees of the AIOC left Abadan.⁹⁶ Some Indian employees of the AIOC petitioned the Iranian parliament with a request to stay. The parliament responded favourably to the appeal.⁹⁷ 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 in everyday life within the city. Figure 11 shows the Iranian Government Commission for takeover of the Abadan Refinery, meeting with the representatives of Iranian and Indian Workers in Abadan, 1951.

Heavy aerial bombing and shelling during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–8) devastated the city of Abadan. The remaining community of Indian migrants in southern Iran, like most other inhabitants, lost what they had built through generations. They had to find new places to inhabit in the central and northern regions of Iran, Isfahan or Tehran. Once again, they were far from home, but in a new home.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁴ For a detailed study of this incident, see Rasmus Christian Elling, 'On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City', in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, ed. Ulrike Freitag (London: Berghahn, Forthcoming).

⁹⁵ Elling, 'On Lines and Fences', *op. cit.*

⁹⁶ Norman Kemp, *Abadan: A First-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis* (London: Allan Wingate, 1953), 239.

⁹⁷ Iranian Parliament Archive, Parliamentary session 164, 5 July 1951.



Figure 11. Iranian Government Commission for Takeover of the Abadan Refinery Meeting with the Representatives of Iranian and Indian Workers, Abadan, 1951

Source: Touraj Atabaki's Private Collection.

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 semi-skilled 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 labour 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 were brought 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 also had a subversive dimension, once they associated with new political ideas from elsewhere, and were globally linked to experiences of labour 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 labour movement in Iran.