

also considered why workers move, including the relationship between the needs of an industry and the migration of workers. For example, Ranajit Das Gupta's examination of migration to work in the factories of Calcutta argues that the most important factor in determining the composition of the workforce was the technology of the industry.<sup>46</sup> In the case of Indians working in the Gulf oilfields, I find that industry needs must be considered along with local affiliations and how workers migrate.

The oil industry in the Gulf was and continues to be structured by a disarticulated process – a process that is not determined solely by the needs of an industry and that is not centrally coordinated. This is not an accident of history; rather, it is an active goal of companies to disarticulate the process. Today, as in the past, many large oil companies do not want to hire their own laborers – thereby absolving themselves of direct responsibility for worker welfare. Instead, large oil companies work with subcontractors who, in turn, work with agents based in India to find workers there. This form of disarticulation combines with laborers' own selective affinities. As I seek to illustrate, given the ways in which labor circulates in the Arabian Sea, workers are central to, but not necessarily bound by, the oil industry and the history of the nation. My analysis deprioritizes industrial needs and focuses instead on how workers move, noting both the constraints on and possibilities of that movement. Here, in particular, I am interested in how migrant workers formed solidarities, how these solidarities were continually in flux, and how these solidarities were shaped and reshaped in key moments such as work stoppages or hunger strikes at oil projects.

The oil industry has some unique characteristics that are rooted in both the material qualities of oil and the managerial development of the industry. In his examination of the

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Labour: Some Structural Features of Formative Years," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 44 (November 1981): 1823–38.

<sup>46</sup> Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India*, pp. 63-64.

connection between oil and democracy, Timothy Mitchell investigates how the materiality of carbon and the differences between coal and oil have led to differing forms of political action. He notes that shifts in social relations came with the greater harnessing of energy produced by coal and helped support cities and large-scale manufacturing. In addition, the manner in which coal was transported and mined – namely, its requirement that laborers work in autonomous underground spaces and that coal transportation had chokepoints – enabled workers to strike effectively. Coal’s materiality and the worker relations it helped foster shaped “the kinds of mass politics that emerged, or threatened to emerge, in the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>47</sup>

The materiality of oil has likewise influenced its production in key ways and shaped forms of political engagements different than those surrounding coal. Some key differences between the mining of coal and the production of oil are that oil requires a smaller workforce and workers are continuously aboveground and therefore open to continuous supervision. In addition, oil’s lightness and fluidity allow it to be transported through pumping stations and pipelines and/or to be shipped. This flexibility of transportation means that oil is transported in a “grid.” This grid-like transportation differs from the “dendritic networks” coal followed via railway. Oil’s grid makes it less vulnerable to strikes of the kind that caused chokeholds for coal’s transport. Consequently, the transportation and working conditions used in the production of oil curtailed “the democratizing potential of petroleum.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the limitations imposed in political action by the materiality of oil, workers in the Gulf oilfields have, nonetheless, formed alliances and negotiated their working situations through political mobilization.

The material qualities of oil are not the only criteria that have influenced labor relations; management techniques and tools specific to the oil industry have also played an important role.

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<sup>47</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “Carbon Democracy,” *Economy and Society* 38, no. 3 (2009): 399–432.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 408.

Techniques and tools used to manage workers in copper and coalmines in the United States were transplanted to the Arabian Gulf and applied to the production of oil in the Middle East. As Robert Vitalis illustrates in his history of the United States' involvement with oil production in Saudi Arabia, key methods developed by American oil companies to curtail labor strikes included the racial segregation of workers and discrepancies in pay based on race.<sup>49</sup> Of course, the use of racism as a management technique was not unique to the oil industry.<sup>50</sup> What were unique, I argue, were the attempts of the oil industry to homogenize labor practices globally. The internationalization of such managerial practices provided a unique site for worker protests, which, in turn, highlighted the specificities of oil production in the Arabian Sea. By looking at worker action in Abadan, Bahrain, and Qatar we see how Indian labor history, the materiality of oil, and American managerial practices influenced and were influenced by imperial administrators, workers, and managers.

### **Communist Strikes at the Abadan Oil Refinery**

Beginning in March 1946, the employees at the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) participated in a series of strikes without the approval of union officials, so-called "wildcat" strikes. The Tudeh Party of Iran or, literally, the Party of the Masses of Iran, was thought by British and Iranian officials to be the driving force of these strikes. This communist party had much influence in 1940s and early 1950s Iran and was able to mobilize tens of thousands of demonstrators in Iran's capital, Tehran, and on the streets of Abadan, where the AIOC oil refinery was located. This was the largest refinery in the world at the time and the site where

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, (New York: Verso, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> For example, Das Gupta shows that racism in colonial industrial projects informed working conditions and management policies. Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India*, pp. 63-64.

most Indians working in Iran were stationed.<sup>51</sup> While Iranian officials understood the Tudeh Party to be a movement by workers to instigate for higher wages and better living conditions, British officials based in India and the Gulf saw the Party as symptomatic of Russia's growing influence in the Persian Gulf and harmful to British companies' businesses, especially the oil industry. This view by the British was reinforced when, also in 1946, the Iranian government, in response to pressure from Tudeh Party leaders, gave the USSR concessions to the northern Iranian oilfields.

The mass agitations against working conditions were not surprising. Manucher Farmanfarmaian, a high-ranking Iranian official,<sup>52</sup> visited the camps and was appalled at the conditions in which workers lived. He wrote, "Wages were 50 cents a day. There was no vacation pay, no sick leave, no disability compensation. The workers lived in a shanty town called Kaghazabad, or Paper City, without running water or electricity...." He contrasted Kaghazabad to the British management's accommodations, which included air conditioning, swimming pools, and tennis courts.<sup>53</sup> Iranian officials were not the only ones to notice this stark disjuncture between the treatment of British workers and others. A British parliamentary delegation characterized the conditions of the (non-British) workers as "'a penal settlement in the

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<sup>51</sup> In 1910, Anglo-Persian Oil Company, renamed AIOC when Persia changed its name to Iran, began recruiting large numbers of Indian workers to work in Persia because local labor was lacking in quality and quantity. By 1946, AIOC employed the most Indians in the Gulf and approximately 2,560 Indians worked for the company. 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 (August 1986): p. 563.

<sup>52</sup> Farmanfarmaian was influential in the development of Iran's oil industry. He worked in the military, then 1943-49 was in the Ministry of Finance; 1949-58 Director General of Petroleum, Concessions, and Mines; 1958 Director of Sales for National Iranian Oil Company; and later Iran's first ambassador to Venezuela.

<sup>53</sup> Manucher Farmanfarmaian and Roxane Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil: Inside the Shah's Iran*, (New York: Modern Library, 1999), pp. 184-185.

dessert' with accommodation 'little better than pig-styes [*sic*].'"<sup>54</sup> The wildcat strikes at AIOC's oilfields and refinery culminated in a large general strike in July 1946, during which fifty employees were killed and 170 injured.

Scholars who discuss these strikes often consider the strikes' effects and, in particular, the relations formed by the AIOC, the Iranian Government, the British Government, and Iranian citizens as a result.<sup>55</sup> However, the laborers who participated in these activities were not limited to Iranians and a diverse group of workers participated in collective action against AIOC. One scholar attentive to this diversity is Ervand Abrahamian. In his discussion of the Tudeh Party's actions in Iran, Abrahamian explores the high percentage of minorities within the Party and the Party's promise of citizenship and secularism.<sup>56</sup> His focus on the multi-generational residents of Iran who supported the Tudeh Party indicates the diversity of workers who participated in the strikes, and sheds light on how solidarities were formed across groups and the complexity of political development in Iran. What Abrahamian does not engage with in depth are the temporary migrant laborers who also participated in the Party's political movements.

Attentiveness to the temporary workers at oil projects in Iran and their role in collective action expands the implications of the July 1946 strikes by decentering the nation from labor narratives and examining instead the global construction of the working class. One place the importance of temporary workers arises is in the case of Indian laborers at the refinery. At Abadan, four days before the general strike, five Muslim men from the Punjab were forced to resign from their positions at the Abadan refinery in Iran because they had joined the Tudeh Party. Despite their resignation, they continued to live in the camps near Abadan. In the coming

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, (New York: Verso, 2011), p. 107.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*; Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1985).

<sup>56</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

days, these five men helped organize a coalition of hundreds of Indians who, in solidarity with Arab-speaking and Farsi-speaking laborers, went on a strike that influenced AIOC and imperial policies in the coming years. A few days after these July strikes, the company, recognizing the danger of the expansion of the localized politics, paid for the five Tudeh Party labor organizers from the Punjab to fly back to Karachi as their “continued presence on the oilfields was considered so undesirable.”<sup>57</sup>

Some aspects of this coalition deserve attention. First, the coalition was class-based. Indian managers did not participate in the strike and remained “loyal” to the company.<sup>58</sup> While they lived in the same conditions as the striking workers, their managerial position influenced their actions and oriented them towards a set of politics that was not tethered to their place of origin or native language. The coalition for the July 14 strike gained momentum from shared ideological (Tudeh) and class sympathies and formed multi-lingual and multi-ethnic alliances. Despite this broad coalition of actors, the five men who were considered the Indian organizers of the strike all came from a few districts in the Punjab near Lahore. These men shared a natal home, a religion, and spoke the same language. This points to the second interesting characteristic of the strike: while the workers were forming broad coalitions, local affective ties rooted in India influenced Indian worker actions. These actions were both based on and formative of a political sensibility that had local roots and followed, but was not limited to, the contours of the British Empire.

These strikes were just one set of a larger number of strikes occurring in the Gulf prior to India’s independence. Other strikes by Indians in the Gulf included strikes at the Kuwait Oil Company in 1946; in Bahrain in 1942 and 1947; in Saudi Arabia in 1943 and 1945; and in Qatar.

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas letters to General Headquarters, 10 July 1946. NAI, MEA, Middle East Branch [ME], 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

<sup>58</sup> Note by Sd. H.C. Beaumont, 5 September 1946. NAI, MEA, ME, 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

British administrators in the Gulf often read these strikes as being signs of the “unrestrained nationalism” of Indian employees.<sup>59</sup> Yet, a closer look at the strikes at Abadan will show that these strikes were, indeed, influenced by a politics of locality, but a locality not limited to the boundaries of the nation. Rather, transnational migration opens up the space to see how migrants construct communities, nations, and empires.

Many narratives of the closing years of British rule in India focus on the departure of the British administration from the Indian subcontinent. Another history of this period is possible. In 1946, as the British Raj was preparing to depart from India, one British military intelligence officer based in Karachi was not devoting his time to the upcoming independence of India. Rather, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas was focusing on the Persian Gulf and the Indian workers based there. In the letters he wrote to his superiors in New Delhi that year, Thomas detailed his travels and long hours spent investigating the strikes discussed above, as well as other strikes in the Persian Gulf. Thomas spent the majority of the year locating the men who were dismissed from their jobs in these strikes, interviewing workers on leave from the Gulf, and searching for the organizers of the strikes at their homes in northern India.

Thomas’s research and the shifting policies at AIOC elucidate the strength of an imagined locality in informing larger political mobilizations; the lasting, powerful effects of affective local ties in transnational movements; and the importance of inter-group solidarity. For example, in order to mitigate the effects of these strikes, the management at AIOC attempted to break apart this inter-group solidarity. One strategy AIOC used was to encourage Arab-speaking employees to form their own union that operated, and negotiated, separately from the Farsi-speaking employee union. The hope of this policy was that it would decrease the Tudeh Party’s

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<sup>59</sup> I J Seccombe and R I Lawless, “Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-50,” p. 569.

influence amongst non-Iranian employees. And to some extent, the policy was effective as strikes increasingly segmented along linguistic and native lines.

For the Indian laborers, local networks intersecting with international carbon politics continued to inform worker attempts to renegotiate their labor and living conditions, but often their mobilizations were unsupported by other laborers at AIOC. On August 4, 1947, Indians again tried to strike in the hope of negotiating better working conditions. Organizers of this strike were able to get between four hundred and five hundred Indians to participate. Despite the success of mobilizing Indian workers, however, organizers were unable to bring Iranians or other nationalities into the strike. The result was that the Indians returned to work on August 6 without any changes in their labor conditions. This second, smaller strike in the Iranian fields indicates the importance of solidarity amongst workers for their actions to be effective. It also points to the power of a regional or national identity to mobilize workers from all over the Indian subcontinent. Like the earlier July strikes, the suspected organizers of the strike were dismissed.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the absence of these workers, strikes continued in the Abadan refinery and Gulf oilfields with varying impact. In Iran, the government's response to these strikes was mixed from worker perspectives. The first minimum wage law came into effect and day rate workers (or unskilled workers) were converted into a more stable form of employment.<sup>61</sup> However, the government also implemented marshal law and began the regulation of unions.<sup>62</sup> While the strikes were small and seemed, at times, to be ineffective, they produced results over time and ultimately had a lasting impact on oil company management. Even today it is an informal policy

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas letter to General Headquarters, 24 August 1946. NAI, MEA, ME, 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

<sup>61</sup> Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil: Inside the Shah's Iran*, p. 186.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, p. 107.



of oil companies not to hire too many workers from the same area in order to avoid political action.

In 1946, workers not only went on strike in Iran, but workers at Kuwait Oil in Kuwait, a subsidiary of AIOC and Gulf Oil (an American company), also carried out a series of strikes that were influenced by the Tudeh Party. These strikes utilized multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic solidarities and in many ways appear similar to strikes at AIOC in Iran. Also, like the strikes in Iran, the Indian organizers of the Kuwait strikes were all from the same area of India and shared a linguistic background. Kuwait Oil, too, deported these workers before they could cause further disturbances.<sup>63</sup>

British agents, such as Thomas, were troubled by the return of these workers to India and feared the consequences of “Tudeh propaganda” in the subcontinent. While many British officials in the Gulf were concerned with maintaining Britain’s access to oil, Thomas was also worried about the rise of communist sentiments among workers in India. He believed the communist ideas that spurred the strikes came to workers based in Iran and Kuwait via the Soviet Union, and he feared such ideas would spread throughout India. Thomas reported that many of the participants in the strikes were “fervent admirers” of the Tudeh Party. He wrote repeatedly to warn his superiors that the workers would continue to disseminate information on communism in India.<sup>64</sup>

Through localized networks of affiliation, workers participated in and promoted subversive movements. These localized networks intersected with and informed transnational labor networks. According to British agents and oil company management, the blame for the strikes did not rest solely with the strike organizers. While both agents and management believed

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas letter to General Headquarters, 31st August 1946. NAI, MEA, ME, 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas letter to General Staff Branch, 10 July 1946. NAI, MEA, ME, 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

the organizers of the strikes were “a bad type of men,” they also laid blame on the “labour recruiting organisation in India for sending” these men to work in the oilfields.<sup>65</sup> This recruiting organization was instrumental in mobilizing thousands of Indians traveling to work in the Persian Gulf and was composed of government representatives, oil company recruiters, and local recruiters. The recruiting organization’s network spanned the Arabian Sea and was composed of the above key participants, along with workers and managers in the oilfields. The network also included oil company headquarters and management in places as far away as England and the United States. The political actions, debates, and collusions engendered within this network indicate the centrality of the materiality of oil, local affiliations, and international carbon managerial practices in structuring the labor politics of the Gulf.

While strikes, such as the July 1946 strike in Iran, were successful because of intergroup solidarity, at other times workers were segregated along linguistic, regional, or ethnic lines and did not have the opportunity to form such solidarities. Divisions were not always imposed from the top down. What also must be considered is how workers, managers, government officials, and local agents formed networks that shaped oil production in the Arabian Sea. Especially important was India’s independence in 1947. After India gained independence, some workers began to ask the nascent Indian nation-state directly to protect their rights abroad.

### **Skilled Workers in Bahrain and Claims for Universal Human Rights**

In 1948, the nascent Indian government received a series of complaints from eight Indian chemists previously employed by the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) in Bahrain. The chemists were all well-educated Hindus; one was Sindhi, two Bengali, and five Malayalee. In their letters and petitions to the Indian government, the chemists claimed that they had been fired

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas letter to General Headquarters, 24 August 1946. NAI, MEA, ME, 1946. 10-(91)-ME/46.

from their jobs because they had complained about the racist inequalities they faced at their worksite in Bahrain. The chemists argued that their dismissal violated the contract they had signed and they appealed to the Indian government to act as an advocate for their rights. The chemists made this claim for government action based on their citizenship and using the rhetoric of universal rights and the equality of Indians on a global stage. According to the chemists, the American management's refusal to recognize the equality of the chemists was the root of the problem. The chemists wrote letters to the government and newspapers and received considerable attention from the local Bombay press, as well as the federal government in Delhi. In response to the chemists' letters and the press coverage, the Indian government investigated the conditions of workers in the Gulf and, in particular, Bahrain.<sup>66</sup>

The key problem, according to the Indian chemists, was that they were not treated fairly by the management at BAPCO. They blamed their unfair treatment on the managerial techniques used by Americans in the company. In a letter to the Indian government, the chemists stated that the Americans fostered a racist attitude towards the Indians. The chemists were offended that they were so poorly treated in spite of their education and accomplishments. Their treatment, however, was not out of the ordinary; it was a common American managerial tactic to divide the labor force at oil projects in terms of race, both in the Gulf and in North America.<sup>67</sup> Unlike the initial policies at AIOC that enabled diverse workers to form solidarity through shared religious beliefs and experiences, American managerial practices separated employees. This separation, at

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<sup>66</sup> The Indian ambassador to Iran argued that the condition of workers in Bahrain was much worse than the condition of workers in Iran. Extract from note on "Bahrain." Original in AWT.Branch F. No. 3(9)-AWT/50. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1948. 22-8/48.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Vitalis outlines in great detail the work done to maintain color lines at the oil projects in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. See, Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, pp. 98-105.

least in Bahrain in 1948, was proving quite effective at preventing workers from forming the kind of political alliances that resulted in strikes.

The chemists, however, developed a new strategy: they asserted solidarity based on their profession and their citizenship in the new Indian nation. Also different from Indian participation in the strikes at Abadan, the workers in this case were appealing to a country outside of the country in which they were working, in an attempt to improve their labor conditions. Instead of forming the inter-ethnic, linguistic, and religious affiliations that enabled the Tudeh Party strikes, the chemists applied a rhetoric of international rights. Their demand for rights did not simply appeal to the Indian government based on their nationality and the nation's obligations to them as citizens, but also used the language of citizenship to appeal to a universal value of human rights. The Indian chemists wrote to BAPCO and the Indian government arguing for the "fundamental Right of Association and of speech recognised even under the U.N.O. [United Nations Organization] charter" and used this argument to critique their dismissal by BAPCO. Instead of seeking to form alliances with other workers to improve their working conditions, the chemists based their action in a new regime of rights and citizenship. In doing so, their largest complaint after their termination was not about their working conditions, but that they were dismissed from their position in a manner that, they argued, violated their human rights.

In order to raise awareness of their situation, the chemists appealed to the Indian press and a local Bombay newspaper took up their cause.<sup>68</sup> This local paper discussed the experience of workers at BAPCO as one of "racial hatred" and compared these experiences with Indian experiences in South Africa – only with the caveat that Bahrain was much worse than South

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<sup>68</sup> It was perhaps due to this attention from papers that led the Indian government to investigate further the chemists' complaints. This may have been especially important given that some Indian officials felt the chemists had not been good employees and were, furthermore, making "a mountain out of a mole [*sic*]." Skilled workers engaged by the Bahrein [*sic*] Petroleum Co., Bahrein. NAI, MEA, Emigration. F. 22-8/48-Emi.

Africa.<sup>69</sup> In one of the Bombay news articles, one of the chemists was quoted as saying, “The Americans are careful not to over-step the boundary as far as the sentiments of the Arabs are concerned. But an Indian remains a slave of the Company, segregated, discriminated, and snubbed on account of his colour.”<sup>70</sup> While the experiences of Indians at Bahrain was certainly unequal to that of Americans and northern Europeans, Arab workers, as well as Farsi-speaking employees, also lived in deplorable conditions and experienced what they considered racist treatment by the American managers.

The discourse deployed by the chemists was one being developed and propagated in the United Nations (UN). In the late 1940s, the same period that the United Nations was focused on ratifying the Declaration of Human Rights, such a strategy was not uncommon; for example, Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia made similar claims.<sup>71</sup> For the chemists, appealing to the Indian government on the basis of human rights had two implications. First, it made the implicit argument that ensuring the recognition of such rights was one of the duties of a liberal democratic state to its citizenry. Second, it banked on the notion that the Indian state would be particularly invested in protecting these rights given the country’s own anticolonial struggles. The Indian state, for example, had encouraged the International Labor Organization, even before

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<sup>69</sup> Indians in South Africa faced racism, discrimination, and exclusion from social spaces. Parvathi Raman, “Being Indian the South African Way,” in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism*, ed. Annie Coombes, (Manchester University Press, 2006), 193–208.

<sup>70</sup> Skilled workers engaged by the Bahrein [sic] Petroleum Co., Bahrein. NAI, MEA, Emigration. F. 22-8/48-Emi.

<sup>71</sup> This problem was also being discussed in the Pakistani press in the 1940s and early 1950s. In the Pakistani paper, *Freedom*, the following was written regarding Pakistani treatment by Americans in the Gulf: “But on reaching Saudi Arabia, the Pakistanis find out that the American officers drunk with racial arrogance, are all too primed to subject young Muslims to an unscrupulous ‘lynch-the-nigger’ treatment. And when the ‘niggers’ muster enough courage to protest against the treatment meted out to them, they are first handed over to the Police and then dispatched to Pakistan without any regard for the terms of contract.” Quoted in Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, p. 103.

India's independence, to develop a Declaration of Human Rights in 1944 as a method of critiquing colonial rule.<sup>72</sup>

The rights to which the chemists referred were first articulated on an international stage with President Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. In this speech, Roosevelt outlined four freedoms – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear – which he considered to be the right of every person in the world. The Allies adopted these four freedoms as their war aims during World War II and these freedoms formed the basis for Eleanor Roosevelt's work in the United Nations on the Declaration of Human Rights. Truman also reiterated these to the UN in 1946. We see here that the racist policies originating out of American oil company policies and these notions of rights and freedoms provided both a structure of repression and of critique. Thus, two differing ideals – racist American managerial practices and a universal discourse of rights – were circulating in the oil arena.

The chemists' claim to these rights indicates that they understood themselves as members of an international community of skilled laborers, entitled to make political demands based on basic, universally shared rights. The chemists felt they were entitled to this respect given their schooling and expertise. The chemists also insisted that BAPCO's management recognize their expertise, both in regards to the field of chemistry and in regards to management of oil companies. It was these claims, according to company management, that led to their ultimate dismissal from their positions and summary deportation, as the management feared the chemists would foster discontent with a larger swath of BAPCO employees by critiquing management practices and policies.

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<sup>72</sup> Daniel R Maul, "The International Labour Organization and the Globalization of Human Rights, 1944-1970," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 301–20.

One Indian official, based in Baghdad, visited Bahrain, Kuwait, and the Trucial Coast in order to ascertain the position of Indians in the oilfields. In his letters to the Indian government in New Delhi, he indicated that workers took oil jobs because there were no jobs in India and were thus compelled to sign contracts that were unfavorable for them. The lack of jobs in India, however, did not mitigate the conditions that workers faced. Indian government officials understood the end of colonialism in India to be a strong factor in mobilizing Indian citizens and motivating them to challenge poor treatment. One government official wrote, "As soon as they reach these places, they find themselves in an inferior position, and being discriminated against. This could be endured in the past, but the change over in India makes these young men feel humiliated."<sup>73</sup> Here, the official indicated that India's new independence altered how workers understood their rights and that India's independence influenced their understanding of their rights.

Class was also a factor in the worker actions at BAPCO in the late 1940s. Despite the attention and support the chemists received from the Indian government, not all Indian workers appealed to the Indian government as a means to change their working conditions. In addition to the eight chemists working at BAPCO in the late 1940s, there were also over one thousand other Indians employed by the company.<sup>74</sup> In 1948, approximately one-third of these employees were skilled employees, or monthly wage laborers, such as the chemists. The other two-thirds of the Indian employees working at BAPCO were daily wage laborers. In a survey of returning workers from BAPCO by the Protector of Emigrants in Bombay (POE), it appears that a few workers were terminated because of their participation in collective action. These employees were, like

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<sup>73</sup> Skilled workers engaged by the Bahrain Petroleum Company. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1948. F 22-8/48-Emi.

<sup>74</sup> This is four times more than the 352 Indians working at the BAPCO in 1940. Annual Report of the Bahrain Petroleum Co. Ltd. for the year 1940. NAI, MEA, Near East Branch, 1941. 360-N/41.

the chemists, skilled, with many working as clerks. Those that claimed they were fired because of collective action said that they, along with three hundred other employees, had written a petition requesting medical facilities near their camps, provisions that were guaranteed in their contract. In speaking with the POE, these workers hoped that the Indian government would take action to enforce their contract and contest their unjust dismissal. Other skilled workers complained to the POE that they were treated with racism. These complaints, like the complaints of the chemists and those seeking medical facilities, came from well-educated, professional employees.

The POE also interviewed twelve unskilled workers who complained about their working conditions in Bahrain in 1948.<sup>75</sup> Complaints included being injured on the job, not being paid their full salary upon termination, and being terminated without due cause. These workers made no attempt to contact the Indian government to negotiate on their behalf or enforce their contracts. One of the key differences between these complaints and those made by the chemists and the clerks was that these unskilled employees were unhappy with their working conditions, but they did not make claims regarding citizenship status or human rights in their appeal for assistance from the government. Which rights of citizenship and rhetoric of rights workers mobilized is telling of class differences. In the wake of independence, a certain type of citizen, one who was of a higher education and income level than most of the population, felt able to situate himself within a cosmopolitan and international workforce. Through situating himself in

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<sup>75</sup> Worker complaints against BAPCO continued into the 1950s. In 1953 in Bahrain, the main problem was housing and workers found there were bad landlords. These landlords had a lot of power over workers whose housing was not supplied by the company because foreigners could not buy land in Bahrain. Not only were Indians unable to buy land and, therefore, have secure housing, but foreign laborers also had very little job security. Indian laborers (and those of other nationalities) constantly had to negotiate the possibility of losing their job. Workers were on a daily contract and this did not provide them with the same stability in income or job security as monthly wage employment. Oil Companies in the Persian-Gulf and Mid-east. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F6-6/53-Emi.



this workforce, the skilled worker made claims upon the nation-state that the nation ought to ensure his (or her) rights. This citizen was also, through emigration and appeal to a discourse of international human rights, able not only to influence the Indian nation's emigration policies, but also to inform the government's understanding of citizenship and rights.

The form of labor mobilization that relied upon international human rights discourse and the citizenship differed markedly from the strikes in Iran and Kuwait just a few years earlier. These differences could indicate a shifting sense of both political action and national obligation for workers. As industry practices began to shift, companies encouraged recruiters to hire workers from diverse areas of India. In addition, the Indian national increasingly began to negotiate with oil companies on behalf of workers. These changes indicate shifting politics of locality that were used by workers to mobilize labor activity – a politics of locality based on the nascent Indian nation and an evolving category of “citizenship.” Importantly, however, ability to petition the nation was not equally accessible to all citizens.

### **Racism and Hunger Strikes at the Aden Refinery**

Like the workers at BAPCO, workers in other areas of the Gulf found racism on the job site unacceptable after India's independence. With the oil crisis in Iran from 1951 to 1953 and the related nationalization of the refinery at Abadan, AOIC directed its refinery investments elsewhere and, in particular, to building a new refinery in Aden. In 1952, British Petroleum (BP)<sup>76</sup> hired over six hundred Indians to help build the refinery. These workers included a couple

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<sup>76</sup> BP was subsidiary of AIOC. In 1954, AIOC renamed itself British Petroleum [BP].

of Indian doctors hired exclusively to attend to workers from Asia, as well as a few clerks; the rest of the Indian employees were hired as cooks.<sup>77</sup>

The larger oil companies did not contract their own labor nor did they negotiate labor contracts directly, electing to use contractors instead. In the case of the refinery project in Aden, British Petroleum worked with two contractors, Bechtel Company and George Wimpey & Company.<sup>78</sup> These contractors sent their general managers to negotiate the contracts with the Indian government.<sup>79</sup> Embedded in the same migration network that Thomas had blamed for the unrest amongst Indians at Abadan, these contractors were pivotal figures between local recruiters and the oil companies and point to the persistence of the oil network in the Arabian Sea. These contractors often held great sway with the Indian government. One recruiter for both Bechtel and Wimpey boasted that he could move “recruits and others in and out of India without the need of visas or travel documents.”<sup>80</sup>

For workers, contractors were often a source of stress – they facilitated migration, but often at the expense of the worker. Workers felt exploited not only by their employers, but also by the recruiting agents. Workers coming for the construction of the Aden refinery claimed that they were not told about the working conditions in Aden. In particular, they said the agent who recruited them did not portray the labor conditions accurately. Workers also claimed that the recruiting system was trying to “mak[e] capital” off workers, thereby implying that the contractors, local recruiters, and, perhaps, even the government were charging workers high rates

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<sup>77</sup> In addition, the company was hiring eight thousand local laborers and it was thought by Indian government representatives that only a few Indians would be kept at the refinery once construction was finished. Express Letter to All Passport Issuing Authorities in India, 24 November 1952. NAI, MEA, Emigration. 6637/52-Emi; Aden- Recruitment of 600 skilled workers from India. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>78</sup> Aden- Recruitment of 600 skilled workers from India. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Sampath from Ghatge, 13 October 1952. NAI, MEA, Emigration. D5080/52-Emi.

<sup>80</sup> Letter to Ghatge from Thadani, 19 March 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

for jobs in the Gulf or emigration permission.<sup>81</sup> Even paying high rates did not guarantee jobs. For example, one worker reported that he paid a bribe of INR 200 to be hired for a manual labor position at Abadan. However, when he arrived at the site, the company discovered that he was underage and sent him back to India.<sup>82</sup>

According to workers, exploitation was not limited to the recruiting process. At the Aden refinery construction project, workers were employed for a contract of eighteen months.<sup>83</sup> Indian employees worked most Sundays and workers reported putting in at least ten hours a day.<sup>84</sup> While recruiters claimed ten-hour workdays were stipulated in the contract, laborers complained that these hours were too long and that they had not been informed of these hours before arriving in Aden. Workers also complained that the long hours constrained their ability to contact the Indian government as a form of redress. For example, one Italian priest told the Commissioner of the Government of India in Aden that the workers wanted to come meet with him, but had little time because they worked Sundays.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, workers were confused by the payment system for overtime hours. The company claimed that workers would be paid overtime upon completion of their contracts, but workers were unaware of this condition.<sup>86</sup>

In addition to working long hours, workers in Aden reported mediocre living conditions. Indian employees lived twenty miles from the site of the refinery in tents. They were provided meals for a small fee (two shillings a day) and their cost of living was included in their wages. They ate in a common mess hall that did not allow for the employees to follow dietary

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<sup>81</sup> Letter to Indian Trade Commission from Indian Employees Committee, 4 July 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>82</sup> Report on the Service Conditions etc. of Indian employees in the Oil Refinery Project at Aden. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F6-4/53-Emi.

<sup>83</sup> Aden- Recruitment of 600 skilled workers from India. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to Ghatge from Thadani, 19 March 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>85</sup> Aden- Recruitment of 600 skilled workers from India. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>86</sup> Letter to Thadani from Ghatge, 26 March 1953; Letter to Ghatge, 26 March 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

restrictions.<sup>87</sup> Finally, Indian workers were not allowed to bring their families to Aden during their contracts.<sup>88</sup> The shared experiences of migration and dealing with difficult working conditions and unresponsive employers thus served to bring Indian workers together and foster a sense of solidarity.

In 1953, 350 Indian employees at the Aden Refinery construction project went on a forty-eight-hour hunger strike.<sup>89</sup> The workers' complaints fell into two main categories: living conditions and discrimination.<sup>90</sup> Workers reported that the food was of poor quality and "unpalatable to Indian taste" and that the latrines were unacceptable. Even a European personnel supervisor at the refinery agreed that the food was not good. This supervisor said that as a result of bad food, many workers lived on bread and jam and could not perform hard labor. He also said that the latrines were unsatisfactory and too close to the Indian employees' tents.<sup>91</sup> When an Indian government employee decided to visit the camp, he found that the bathrooms were "insufferable" and smelled bad; the food, he decided, was not "bad," but "by no means good."<sup>92</sup> In addition, the company insisted that the workers were happy with their hours and living conditions.<sup>93</sup>

The Indian employees argued that discriminatory practices at the refinery were the main reason behind their long work hours, and also a factor restricting their access to recreational facilities. One worker said that he worked a minimum of ten hours a day, but more often worked twelve or fourteen hours and was given no credit for overtime. He described spending all day in

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<sup>87</sup> Aden- Recruitment of 600 skilled workers from India. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>88</sup> Letter to Manager, BP, from Ghatge, 23 February 1953. NAI, MAI, Emigration, 1952. D 4498/52.

<sup>89</sup> Telegram to Embassy of India, Cairo. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>90</sup> Letter to POE, Bombay, from BP, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. G/16307.

<sup>91</sup> Extract from Monthly Report No. 5 of 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>92</sup> Letter to the Secretary, MEA, from Thadani, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

<sup>93</sup> Letter to Ghatge, 26 March 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

the hot sun and, upon asking for a transfer, being refused. When he quit, he said that the European worker who replaced him who was given a “fat” salary and assistants.<sup>94</sup> Such discrepancies in the treatment of Indians and Europeans were compounded by the fact that the American manager in charge of the Indian employees’ mess hall reportedly abused their nationality in the most “insulting of terms.” Indians were also barred from other spaces. The cinema, for example, was off limits to Indian workers and designated “European only” – something the Indian workers said was in breach of their contract.<sup>95</sup> Indians also faced barriers accessing other leisure activities. For example, Indians did not feel they were getting adequate time at the cricket field.<sup>96</sup> In addition, Indian employees were upset because the bar was only open part of the day, but, in the American and European mess halls, it was always open. They felt segregated from “Italian and other white employees” and felt that Indians were treated more poorly than European employees. They also pointed to their living accommodations, which were made of plywood and extremely hot as a result of having no fans.<sup>97</sup>

From the perspective of the Indian employees, the discrimination they faced was based on skin color.<sup>98</sup> Despite experiencing these inequalities, Indians were not above marshaling discriminatory discourse in their own favor, when necessary. Indian workers complained about being forced to live with Arabs,<sup>99</sup> whom the Indians described as having a “lower standard of

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<sup>94</sup> Extract from Monthly Report No. 5 of 1953; Letter to the Trade Commissioner, Aden, from Bechtel and Wimpey, 20 May 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to the Secretary, MEA, from Thadani, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi; Letter to Indian Trade Commission from Indian Employees Committee, 4 July 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>96</sup> Letter to POE, Bombay, from BP, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. G/16307.

<sup>97</sup> Letter to the Secretary, MEA, from Thadani, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

<sup>98</sup> Letter to the Trade Commissioner, Aden, from Bechtel and Wimpey, 20 May 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

<sup>99</sup> Letter to POE, Bombay, from BP, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. G/16307.

living and not of clean habits.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, it was deemed particularly outrageous that they, Indian workers, were *not even* treated as well as the Arab employees. They complained of being paid less than workers coming from the Levant and the same amount as local workers with less skills and experience. One Indian highlighted the situation by pointing out that the Adenese “orderly who serves the office with tea and has little or no qualifications to be called literate draws as much pay as us ... the Indian is getting a very raw deal.”<sup>101</sup>

When the hunger strike began, Indian workers sent a telegram to the Indian ambassador in Egypt.<sup>102</sup> Before the strike, the workers had conveyed their grievances to the Commissioner of the Government of India in Aden and complained that they were working ten-hour days and not getting overtime. Furthermore, they complained that if and when employees resigned, they were forced to pay for their own return passage. Paying for this passage was an economic hardship and had the effect of “virtually keep[ing] them in bondage for the period of their contract.”<sup>103</sup>

The hunger strike successfully drew the attention of BP and the Indian government. The demographics of this strike were different from the strikes at Abadan or the complaints of the chemists in Bahrain. Notably, the striking workers were all Indians and did not form alliances with workers from other nations, as was the case in Abadan. Also distinct from both Abadan and Bahrain, this strike mobilized workers at all levels, from day laborers to skilled employees. The fact that it was not just skilled, educated Indians making claims on the Indian government based on citizenship, but unskilled, less educated workers as well suggests that an expanding notion of citizenship was forming and gaining popularity among workers abroad. This notion of

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<sup>100</sup> Extract from Monthly Report No. 4 of 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

<sup>101</sup> Letter to Indian Trade Commission from Indian Employees Committee, 4 July 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>102</sup> Telegram to Embassy of India, Cairo. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.23-9/52-Emi.

<sup>103</sup> Letter to the Secretary, MEA, from Commissioner, 22 May 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration. 11(5)CA/53.

citizenship cut across the various differences among Indian workers, but emphasized instead their differences from European and Arab employees. Because they comprised such a large cross-section of workers, the striking Indian employees were able to garner the support of the Indian government, which, in turn, exerted pressure on the oil company to improve workers conditions.

The hunger strike ended forty-eight hours after it began, and no one was fired as a result of the action.<sup>104</sup> Rumors circulated in the camp that some employees were fired because they helped to organize the strike, but when the Indian government interviewed the workers, they reported not feeling intimidated after the strike. Rather, according to the Bombay POE, one of these leaders was fired because he was “incompetent and undesirable” in character and the other was fired because his position had become redundant.<sup>105</sup> In response to the complaints by Indian employees, BP and its contractors insisted that working conditions were the same for Indians as they were for American and European workers. From the companies’ perspective, the whole strike could be blamed on “a few malcontents” who were not representative of the majority. Some Indian employees at the camp agreed with the company’s assessment. One Indian worker said of his colleagues, “while earning only a pittance in India are accustomed to low standards of living, come to the Aden Refinery and make fantastic demands.”<sup>106</sup> Despite these discrepancies in Indian perspectives and the companies’ dismissive view of the strike, the bulk of employees stood by the Indian Employee Committee, which worked as a representative of Indian workers in their struggles with the company and organized the strike.

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<sup>104</sup> Letter to Undersecretary, MEA, from POE, Bombay, 12 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2489/53-Emi.

<sup>105</sup> Letter to Secretary, MEA, from Thadani, 18 July 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 3206/53-Emi; Letter to Das Gupta from Ghatge, 1 August 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 3496/53-Emi; Letter to POE, Bombay, from BP, 29 August 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. G/16402.

<sup>106</sup> Letter to the Secretary, MEA, from Thadani, 10 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

The Commissioner of the Government of India at Aden felt that the “unity exhibited by the Indian employees during the hunger strike has I believe made some impression on the European management.”<sup>107</sup> The workers’ unity as Indians and as a negotiating block may be compared with the failed strikes of the early 1950s. Strikes often lost their effectiveness due to lack of unity among the Indian employees. The gap between employees was most pronounced between senior and junior employees, at least according to one Indian government observer who argued that senior workers were loath to join collective action. Government officials attributed this lack of unity to a generational difference – namely, that senior workers were more submissive, whereas junior workers felt more strongly about their rights and were more emboldened by the new independence of India.

When employees complained to the Indian government concerning their treatment, they were significantly aided by employee associations. Employee associations gave legitimacy to employee complaints by increasing the solidarity of worker action. In turn, the Indian government contacted these associations in order to evaluate the claims of workers when government officials based in the Gulf were unable to do so. However, the Indian government did not view all employee associations equally. Some had only weak influence and the workers who joined feared losing their jobs for doing so. One employee association letter written to the Indian government was unsigned because the employees feared they would be fired if their action was discovered. Unfortunately, this strategy had a self-fulfilling effect, as government officials viewed the letter with skepticism and suspected the association either did not actually exist or did not represent a large number of employees because of the lack of signatures.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Skilled workers engaged by the Bahrein [sic] Petroleum Co., Bahrein. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1948. F. 22-8/48-Emi.



During the strike, company management met with the Indian Employee Committee. However, management declined to keep a written record of what was discussed, arguing that it was not the policy of the company to “deal with a group or a nationality unless they returned to work and tendered their requests through the proper channels set up for them.”<sup>109</sup> The company also argued that Indian employees got the same rice, fish, meat, and other food as all other workers at the site. They pointed out that Indian chefs cooked the food for all Indian employees. One company manager said, “The British Americans, and Italian personnel accept the condition with understanding and tolerance; not so the Indians.” Many of the managers felt that Indian employees simply needed to adapt and claimed that Indian employees were “reactionary” and likely to “inflect other employees with radical ideas.”<sup>110</sup>

Management also attempted to legitimate the discrepancies in pay based on global inequalities. One manager argued that the company was “in no way responsible for the different standards of living and comparative wage scales throughout the world.”<sup>111</sup> Through such an argument, the managers claimed that the differences in treatment and pay of employees were based on the nationality of the employee, even as the management simultaneously refused to deal with employees through national employee unions. This argument was common in the oil industry in the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, one oil company claimed, “racial discrimination is unknown in the Company’s operation.” A manager at the company went on to say,

Benefits given to one nationality usually extended to all others. Saudi Arabs are handled on an equal basis and we seldom find any one nationality being given any preferential treatment ... This follows the principle laid down by Saudi Arabian Government requiring that the

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<sup>109</sup> Minutes of Meeting with Two Representatives of Indian Employees, 3 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi.

<sup>110</sup> Report of Dr. Chand, Embassy of India, Baghdad, 22 April 1954. NAI, MEA, Emigration (originally in AWT section), 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi/ D.2049/AWT/54.

<sup>111</sup> Report Dated 30 July 1953 from Messrs. Middle East Bechtel Corporation and George Wimpey & Co., Ltd., Aden. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi.

company treat the Saudi Arab on an equal basis with personnel recruited from countries located east of the Atlantic.<sup>112</sup>

These types of claims sought to naturalize differences between American management and workers hired from the Middle East or India. The international oil management practices applied in Bahrain and Aden, as well as in other parts of the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, used racial discrimination as a method both to control the workforce and then excuse such practices, by pointing to global inequalities that just existed “naturally.”

In addition to discrimination, companies used outright intimidation to control their employees. During conversations with workers, the Commissioner learned that Indian workers lived in daily fear of their employer. He wrote that the Indian employees were “terrified of victimization” due to a “spy system” that the Company used to control employees. This spy system was composed of six Indian informants who provided the company with information about the other Indians. The result was that the rest of the Indians were afraid of the informants.<sup>113</sup> This spy system was particularly perilous for the Indians who led the Indian Employee Committee, as they feared the company was compiling a “black list” of those suspected to have led the strike and that the employees on the list would be “sent packing.”<sup>114</sup> When the Indian government reopened recruitment shortly after the strike, this fear became more pronounced.<sup>115</sup> This was because Indian workers at the refinery knew there were many Indians willing to take their place, so with reopened recruitment, disgruntled workers could be easily dismissed and replaced by workers who would not complain.

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<sup>112</sup> Letter to POE, Bombay from E.E. Evans, Recruiting Agent, Arabian American Oil Co, 30 March 1954. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi.

<sup>113</sup> In response to these allegations, the Commissioner “gave [the Indian employee] a short lecture on building national character, for communicating to his colleagues [at the refinery].” Extract from Monthly Report No. 4 of 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2954/53-Emi.

<sup>114</sup> Letter to Secretary, MEA, from Commissioner, 27 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2779/53-Emi.

<sup>115</sup> Telegram to Foreign Office, New Delhi, 8 July 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 27321/53-Emi.

In the wake of the hunger strike, the Indian government looked into the living conditions of workers at the Aden refinery. Directed from the central government in Delhi, the Commissioner of the Government of India in Aden and the Protector of Emigrants in Bombay investigated the claims made by workers and attempted to form a plan of action to redress their poor treatment. One of the government's immediate actions was to briefly halt all recruitment from India for the Aden refinery.<sup>116</sup> In the inquiry into the effects of the strike, the government spoke with two workers who were thought to have led the strike and were subsequently dismissed from their employment. According to these workers, the results were mixed: there were still no fans in workers' sleeping areas; cold water was available to Indians; the food had deteriorated, but beef was being served less often; and the hours of work had not changed significantly, though workers at least now knew they were accruing overtime. One worker said that if the living conditions improved, workers would not mind the hours.<sup>117</sup> Finally, in September, the workers were able to move into a new camp.<sup>118</sup>

The choice to go on a hunger strike and not a regular strike deserves some attention. Building upon the popularity of trade unions in India after World War I, strikes in India were a preferred method of agitating against working conditions and promoting solidarity amongst workers. In 1951, there were 120 registered strikes and hundreds of additional strikes in the Indian bidi industry alone.<sup>119</sup> The hunger strike, in contrast, was less popular and uncommon in

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<sup>116</sup> Letter to Undersecretary, MEA, from POE, Bombay, 12 June 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 2489/53-Emi; Letter to POE, Bombay, from Undersecretary, MEA, nd. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 23-9/53-Emi.

<sup>117</sup> Letter to Das Gupta from Ghatge, 1 August 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. 3496/53-Emi.

<sup>118</sup> Report Dated 30 July 1953 from Messrs. Middle East Bechtel Corporation and George Wimpey & Co., Ltd., Aden. NAI, MEA, Emigration, 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi.

<sup>119</sup> Rina Agarwala, "From Work to Welfare," *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (December 2006): p. 430; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 179-230.

the Gulf. Facing restrictions on labor unions and formal strikes, the hunger strike at Aden gave workers a means to address their working conditions. This method of protest, popularized by Gandhi, was especially poignant given the history of India's colonization and the contemporary discrimination workers faced. By appealing to the Indian government to protest both their treatment during the process of migration and after arriving in Aden, these workers defined themselves as a community of Indians and, through their strike, evoked memories of the country's own struggle for equality.

### **Conclusion: Citizenship, Worker Rights, and Oil Companies**

Workers defined social affiliations and politics of locality from the village to the nation as they responded to the management practices of oil companies and attempted to improve their living conditions. The strikes, protests, and complaints lodged by workers illustrate that while the materiality of oil imposed certain parameters on labor, the production of oil was also a site where international managerial practices and localized politics met. This conjunction presents opportunities to destabilize historical narratives that focus on the history of the nation-state and shed light instead on how workers' various networks and solidarities created and invoked scales of the local, national, and transnational.

Despite worker protests, however, the situation for workers in the Gulf did not improve. Throughout the 1950s, workers repeatedly complained of discrimination and lack of job stability. For example, in Qatar in 1953, workers pointed to continued differential treatment of Indian and non-Indian employees. Indian workers felt they were discriminated against on the basis of their nationality and religion. This discrimination was not constrained to one type of worker. Laborers as well as skilled professionals complained. Not unlike the chemists in Bahrain, one medical

doctor complained that he was treated “like an ordinary medical orderly.” Given their even lower pay, day laborers felt especially vulnerable to discriminatory policies. At Qatar Petroleum Company (QPC), laborers felt that discrimination at the company influenced everything from their daily interactions with management to their housing conditions. Anger over the latter came to a head and rig workers stopped work for a short period in 1953. Strikes by Indians, however, were becoming less effective. During the strike in Qatar, the ruler, Sheikh Ali al-Thani, intervened. With this intervention, the men returned to work, despite the fact that the company did not comply with their demands.<sup>120</sup> Throughout the 1950s the ability of Indian workers to agitate for better working conditions was increasingly curtailed.

Looking at worker action before and after India’s independence illustrates how India’s independence allowed workers to appeal to the nation-state for assistance and protection. Workers faced discrimination, and oil companies often hoped this discrimination would limit workers ability to make effective claims on management. But the dignity that Indians felt they were due after India’s independence served to bolster their claims. This independence also helped Indians to form alliances across linguistic and, at times, class divisions. In the case of labor strikes in the oilfields of the Persian Gulf in the 1940s and 1950s, investigations into the materiality of oil and its consequences for labor action may be coupled with an exploration of international carbon managerial practices in order to give meaning to these strikes that is not bound by the history of the nation or empire. It is not on oil alone that the network hinges. The requirements of the oil industry are not defined solely by the industry itself. Instead, one must consider the multiplicity of actors within the network and the localized politics those actors bring with them to the oilfields. By the mid-twentieth century, materials, ideas, and people were all

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<sup>120</sup> Extract from the report submitted by Mr. Mahboob Ahmed, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1953. NAI, MEA, Emigration (originally AWT section), 1953. F.6-6/53-Emi. D892/54.

moving through circuits that cross-cut empires and nations, solidifying the salience of those political entities in some instances, challenging them in others. This investigation of how affiliations and networks informed migration and enabled workers' actions helps us to understand to what ends the postcolonial nation was invoked from abroad. In the next chapter, I will examine the Indian government's response to these claims from workers abroad.