

Political lives at sea: working and socialising to and from the India Round Table Conference in London, 1930–1932

Stephen Legg

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2019

Received in revised form

6 December 2019

Accepted 17 December 2019

Keywords:

Sea

Conferences

Imperialism

India

Anti-colonialism

ABSTRACT

This paper presents new ways of thinking about both the spatial relationality of a political event, and a mobile perspective on interwar imperialism, anti-colonialism and Indian nationalism. Between 1930 and 1932 over one hundred delegates from India visited London to participate in the three sessions of the Round Table Conference, which determined India's constitutional future within the British Empire. This conference informally began, and continued, at sea, during the two to three week journey between India and Britain. The steamships that the delegates travelled in are portrayed here as places of work, drawing especially on the diaries of the Hindu nationalist Dr B.S. Moonje, but also of social observation and tension, illustrated through the coverage of M.K. Gandhi's spiritual journey. Through these seaborne political lives the conference itself was anticipated and digested across the watery expanses between Europe and India.

© 2019 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Having travelled to London in the autumn of 1930, Indian political, social and business leaders set about discussing the next stage of the country's constitutional development within the British Empire at a Round Table Conference (RTC). The conference eventually sat in three sessions, necessitating prolonged stays in London (ten weeks in 1930, twelve weeks in 1931, six weeks in 1932).¹ The eventual result was the Government of India Act of 1935 which devolved powers to Indian administered regional provinces and established the blueprint for a future federal India.²

While the limited literature on the RTC focuses on events in and around the conference venue of St James's Palace, this paper focuses on the journey by sea and land between Bombay and London, which took at least two weeks. Although the three sessions of the conference differed greatly in terms of personnel and politics, all Indian delegates undertook this journey. This paper focuses on these journeys and shows that two types of activity were taking place on-board, which grant us special insight into the politics of both the conference and the interwar imperial world. First, the

ships were places of work, preparing for and digesting the outcomes of the conference, where alliances were forged and disagreements debated. Secondly, these vessels were also places of socialisation, in which the racial and cultural practices of Indian delegates were commented upon by travellers and journalists.

Attending to the experiences of the over one hundred delegates as they travelled to and from the three sessions of the RTC can tell us much about the postcolonial geographies of the interwar world, as well as expanding the historical geographies through which we comprehend this political event. Such an approach fits into longer traditions of thinking about imperialism relationally. This was the stock in trade of traditional geography, following the things of empires from production to consumption.³ It was also central to the

³ For instance, the three volumes of Viscount Sandon and F.E. West's *A Geography of Everyday Things*, Oxford, 1932, traced items from the bedroom, the living room and the kitchen to their origins across and beyond the Empire. For a discussion of contemporary visual representations of these commodity relations see U. Kothari, Trade, consumption and development alliances: the historical legacy of the Empire Marketing Board poster campaign, *Third World Quarterly* 35 (2014) 43–64.

E-mail address: stephen.legg@nottingham.ac.uk.

¹ The conference technically ran from November 1930 to December 1932, with work continuing in India between the three London sessions, which took place from 12th November 1930 to 19th January 1931, 7th September to 1st December 1931, and 17th November to 24th December 1932.

² The most detailed summary of the conference remains that of R.J. Moore, *The Crisis of Indian Unity, 1917–1940*, Oxford, 1974.

'new imperial history' project of tracing imperial networks, articulated at a personal level through tracking imperial and post-colonial lives across and beyond empires.⁴ It has informed attempts to think about scales as networks of, and names for, relations that connect bodies, cities, regions, nations and empires.⁵ It has also informed studies of nodes within these relational networks, which both enabled and archived these relations.⁶ This paper contributes to these relational geographies through exploring the lived experience of being in motion between India and Britain (while emphasising the ongoing connections to the land), and by showing how political lives were constituted through both working and socialising at sea. It also focuses on a particular event space that triggered this mobility, and which was constituted by it in under-acknowledged ways.

International conferences were spaces that depended upon relations and mobility, drawing people together to debate and negotiate.⁷ Amongst the emerging field of historical conference studies, the labour required to facilitate this mobility has been acknowledged.⁸ This paper contributes a richer sense of the geographies of mobility associated with conferencing, focusing specifically on experiences at sea. Such an approach emerges from the efforts of historical geographers to fathom the watery expanses beyond the more familiar historiography of earth writing (geography).

Sea-writing and the interwar world

Traditional geographical approaches to the history of sea travel were dominated by the geographical imagination of exploration and the discursive subjectivity of the heroic explorer. Before the ages of 'Geography Militant' and 'Geography Triumphant' came 'Geography Fabulous', which for many referred to the sense of wonder at the explorers as much as the worlds they found.⁹ Navigating the oceans involved, and facilitated, the conquering of time itself.¹⁰ For the right-wing legal theorist Carl Schmitt this further facilitated 'a revolution of sweeping scope, that of planetary space', which was led by the British Empire, a sovereign leviathan of the sea.¹¹

⁴ A. Lester, Spatial concepts and the historical geographies of British colonialism, in: A. Thompson (Ed), *Studies in Imperialism*, 100th Edition, Manchester, 2013, 118–142; D. Lambert and A. Lester (Eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2006; R. Craggs and H. Neate, Post-colonial careering and urban policy mobility: between Britain and Nigeria, 1945–1990, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017) 44–57.

⁵ S. Legg, *Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities and Interwar India*, Durham, NC, 2014.

⁶ S. Hazareesingh, Interconnected synchronicities: the production of Bombay and Glasgow as modern global ports c.1850–1880, *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009) 7–31; P. Mitchell, A. Lester and K. Boehme, 'The centre of the muniment': archival order and reverential historiography in the India Office, 1875, *Journal of Historical Geography* 63 (2019) 12–22.

⁷ R. Craggs and M. Mahony, The geographies of the conference: knowledge, performance and protest, *Geography Compass* 8 (2014) 414–430; J. Hodder, S. Legg and M. Heffernan, Introduction: historical geographies of internationalism, 1900–1950, *Political Geography* 49 (2015) 1–6.

⁸ J. Hodder, Conferencing the international at the World Pacifist Meeting, 1949, *Political Geography* 49 (2015) 40–50; R. Leow, A missing peace: the Asia-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing, 1952 and the emotional making of third world internationalism, *Journal of World History* 30 (2019) 21–53.

⁹ Despite the critical reading by the author of these categories, see J. Conrad, Geography and some explorers, *The National Geographic Magazine* XLV (1924) 241–274; also see F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration in the Age of Empire*, Oxford, 1999.

¹⁰ C.W.J. Withers, The longitude question, *Journal of Historical Geography* 47 (2015) 1–5.

¹¹ C. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, Washington, 1997 [1942], 28.

Under the influence of new imperial history, postcolonial theory and self-interrogative disciplinary histories, David Lambert, Luciana Martins and Miles Ogborn made an emphatic case in 2006 for revisiting such interpretations as part of a broader historical geography of the sea.¹² They reviewed a wide literature regarding the significance of the way oceans were named and narrated, imagined and desired, and were experienced in terrestrial, elemental and socio-material ways.¹³ In terms of the latter, this involved acknowledging the range of physical objects that transported people across the waves, so that '[p]irate ships, slave vessels, canoes, rafts, ocean liners, tramp steamers, destroyers and submarines are all open to the investigation of the making of social and cultural differences'.¹⁴ Such differences included the way gender, class, race and sexuality dictate life at sea as much as on land.¹⁵

These differences would, of course, be conditioned by period, technology and route of transit. From the 1850s, steam technology transformed experiences of sea travel, bringing the industrial revolution, nationalism and a new imperialism to the seas.¹⁶ For instance, the Peninsula and Oriental ('P&O') Steam Navigation Company was incorporated by British royal charter in 1840 to facilitate communication with the Empire in the east. It contributed to slashing the travel time to the Indian Ocean from up to six months, travelling around the Cape of Good Hope, to just six weeks, sailing through the Mediterranean and then travelling across Egypt to the Red Sea (before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869).

While this focus on sea routes is important, it draws our attention away again from the means and materiality of sea mobility: the ship. Anyaa Anim-Addo, William Hasty and Kimberley Peters have noticed this tendency to focus on the sea and on shipped mobilities (that which is moving, the cargo or passengers) rather than the ship's mobility itself (the vessel).¹⁷ The point is not to focus on stationary objects moving through the sea, but to ask how we might consider mobility in and on-board ships, whether it be a daily walk about deck, forced immobility in a cramped cabin, or the backbreaking labour required to keep a ship on the move, and on course.

It is important to recognise the radically different ways in which sea travel, and mobility within ships, was experienced. One way of framing the diversity of this literature is to counterpose work on elite and 'subaltern' experiences of sea life. In terms of elite depictions of modern sea travel, recent work has supplemented depictions of the hardy hero with complementary visions of both luxury and boredom on ocean liners, one of the chief objects of post-imperial, maritime nostalgia. A 2017–2018 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, entitled 'Ocean Liners: Speed and Style' was a critical and popular success, emphasising the

¹² D. Lambert, L. Martins and M. Ogborn, Currents, visions and voyages: historical geographies of the sea, *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006) 479–493.

¹³ For a review of geographers' work on this field in the following decade see P.E. Steinberg, Oceans and seas: human geography, *International Encyclopedia of Geography*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg0759>; also see D. Armitage, A. Bashford and S. Sivasundaram (Eds), *Oceanic Histories*, Cambridge, 2017.

¹⁴ Lambert, Martins and Ogborn, Currents, visions and voyages, 487.

¹⁵ Lambert and Lester (Eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*.

¹⁶ J. Stafford, A sea view: perceptions of maritime space and landscape in accounts of nineteenth-century colonial steamship travel, *Journal of Historical Geography* 55 (2017) 69–81.

¹⁷ A. Anim-Addo, W. Hasty and K. Peters, The mobilities of ships and shipped mobilities, *Mobilities* 9 (2014) 337–349.

opulence and political significance of these 'floating palaces'.¹⁸

Despite this glamour and power, however, the experience of modern sea travel became, for many, an aching bore. Jeffrey Auerbach opens his recent book, *Imperial Boredom*, with an account of how journeys across the seas had lost the awe and terror of Geography Fabulous.¹⁹ Observations of nature and even of human settlements en route had become routine, while technological and navigational advances had made sea routes safe, and travel along them punctual. Even expressions of monotony aboard ship had become monotonous, making travellers reluctant to record and publish their reflections on sea travel. Luxurious steam liners did little to lift many elite travellers' ennui, despite the effort and expense that went in to keeping them entertained (although the social discomforts between first and second-class passengers, and between those and the 'steerage' class, were always of interest). Auerbach acknowledges that this boredom was a luxury not enjoyed by the subjects of empire, especially those who manned the ships, although accounts of labour on board also suggested a drudging monotony to toiling below and above deck.²⁰

Recent scholarship has striven to bring subaltern experiences of sea travel to light. These include accounts of slavery, indentured labour and religious pilgrimage.²¹ Broader research is also beginning to uncover the experiences of the millions of seaborne labourers who, quite literally, kept the British Empire afloat.²² Ships and ports could also become spaces of solidarity and contestation, bringing together networks of multiple and complex subaltern resistance.²³ Between the world-historical violence of the slave ship and the solidarity of sailors lie many-hued subaltern geographies of the ocean, beyond both territorial epistemologies and archival representation.²⁴

In *Across Oceans of Law*, for example, Renisa Mawani describes an early twentieth-century attempt to form an Indian, Sikh steamship company.²⁵ On arrival in Vancouver after its maiden voyage in 1914, the SS Komagata Maru was detained while the white settler dominion government debated how to square the supposed free movement of British subjects across the empire with its desire to maintain racial purity. Mawani's work is significant for this paper in two ways. First, it focuses on neither the elite nor the labouring subaltern but on relatively middle-class travellers.²⁶ Second, rather than focusing on intra-colonial Indian travel, or white experiences of the colonial world, it explores the experiences of colonial subjects travelling to a putatively white nation. While the experiences of Indians in Britain, especially, have been explored, their experiences of travel are less well known.²⁷

How, then, might we consider the experiences of (mostly) Indian delegates travelling to Europe for the Round Table Conference? Lambert, Martins and Ogborn suggest that we think not just of ports but of all cities as connected, at various states of removal, to the cargo and vessels of the sea.²⁸ If this is the case, the discussion below demonstrates how we might analyse ships as connected to the cities and territories between which they travel in order to show how the social hierarchies of land became seaborne, and how they changed in doing so. Through doing this, it explores a lived and vital space that reminds us, as David Featherstone has done repeatedly, that the geographies of anti-colonialism exceeded the territorial bounds of the nation-state.²⁹

Studying the journeys of delegates from India allows us to focus on the geographical richness and complexity of interwar imperial politics and its political actors, enhancing the existing literature regarding its historical richness and complexity. Before moving on to the journeys to and from London, some of the key actors and political movements that shaped the RTC between 1930 and 1932 will be introduced.

In mid October 1929 Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India, had pressed Sir John Simon, who was leading British investigations into constitutional reform there, to request a conference that would bring Indian delegates to London.³⁰ Despite the 'Wall Street Crash' of October 29th, by the end of the month the Labour government, under Ramsay MacDonald, had agreed to host the first session, planned for and held there the following summer.³¹ In response to the mounting economic crisis a British election was held in October 1931, which fell while the second session of the RTC was sitting. A cross-party National Government was formed to implement an economic plan, with MacDonald presiding as prime minister over a mostly Conservative cabinet. 'Die Hard' Tories opposed the main proposal of the RTC, which was a federal India that would unite directly-ruled British India with the indirectly-ruled Indian States (or Princely India), governed by hereditary monarchs.³² In contrast, the more centrist Tories in the cabinet continued negotiations with those representatives of Indian political society who had been invited to London.³³

The most famous of these delegates, M.K. Gandhi, attended the second session as the sole spokesperson for the Indian National Congress.³⁴ After honing his non-violent creed in London and South Africa, Gandhi had risen to prominence in 1919 through the protests against authoritarian legislation in post-war India, followed by the non-cooperation movement of 1920–1922.³⁵ After a period of social reform campaigns and constitutional engagement in the 1920s, Congress had launched a mass civil disobedience campaign in March 1930 in response to the refusal of Viceroy Irwin to guarantee that the RTC would grant India dominion status within the empire (alongside Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand). Congress also boycotted the third RTC session in 1932, believing that the proposed federation was an imperial compact between two non-democratic bodies: the British state and the

¹⁸ The exhibition attracted 73,645 visitors in under a month, see Victoria and Albert Museum Annual Report and Accounts 2017–2018 at <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/reports-strategic-plans-and-policies>, accessed 29th January 2019. See D. Finamore and G. Wood (Eds), *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style*, London, 2018.

¹⁹ J.A. Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire*, Oxford, 2018.

²⁰ Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom*.

²¹ M. Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, London, 2007; A. Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920*, Cambridge, 2017; J. Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865–1956*, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

²² S.S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, Cambridge, MA, 2013; C. Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*, Cambridge, 2012.

²³ D. Featherstone, *Solidarities: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*, London, 2012.

²⁴ S. Chari, Subaltern sea? Indian Ocean errantry against subalternization, in: T. Jazeel and S. Legg (Eds), *Subaltern Geographies*, Athens, GA, 2019, 191–209.

²⁵ R. Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire*, Durham, NC, 2018.

²⁶ Also see A. Davies, *Geographies of Anticolonialism: Political Networks Across and Beyond Southern India, c. 1900–1930*, London, 2019, 65–87.

²⁷ R. Ahmed and S. Mukherjee, *South Asian Resistances in Britain, 1858–1947*, London, 2012.

²⁸ Lambert, Martins and Ogborn, *Currents, visions and voyages*, 486.

²⁹ Featherstone, *Solidarities*.

³⁰ I. Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917–1947*, Cambridge, 1997, 72.

³¹ National Archives of India [hereafter NA]/F&P Reforms Branch/1929/file 193–R.

³² A. Muldoon, *Empire, Politics and the Creation of the 1935 India Act: Last Act of the Raj*, Farnham, 2009.

³³ S.J.G. Hoare, *Nine Troubled Years*, London, 1954.

³⁴ M. Lester, *Entertaining Gandhi*, London, 1932; D. Arnold, *Gandhi*, Longman, 2001, 156–161; R. Guha, *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World, 1914–1948*, London, 2018.

³⁵ F. Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*, London, 2012.

Indian Princes.³⁶

The princes were, indeed, central to the RTC.³⁷ Being indirectly governed as part of the Indian Empire they could not be compelled to federate and much of the RTC (and 1930s Indian politics more broadly) was devoted to the Indian government convincing the princes that they would be safer within a federal union than outside it. Perhaps the most consistent campaigners for federation were Indian moderate liberals, who wanted to see India secure greater democratic freedom within the British Empire.³⁸ Retrospectively discounted as swimming against the tides of history (whether of Congress led anti-colonialism, of leftist politics or of religious 'communal' nationalism), figures such as Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, the Right Honourable V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and Sir A.P. Patro were central constitutional thinkers and political mediators at the RTC.³⁹

It is also possible, retrospectively, to read the origins of the 1947 partition of the Indian Empire into India and Pakistan in the wrangling between Hindu and Muslim delegates at the RTC.⁴⁰ Communal debates over the nature of joint or separate minority electorates and the distribution of legislative seats proved irresolvable at the RTC, although Hindu and Muslim delegates were also split along the lines outlined above. Amongst Muslim representatives were moderates like Sir Muhammed Shafi; the (once) radical Pan-Islamist leaders of the Khilafat movement in India, brothers Muhammad and Shaukat Ali; the legal expert and future leader of the Muslim League, Muhammad Ali Jinnah; and the representative of the vast South Indian Muslim princely state of Hyderabad, Sir Muhammad Akbar Hydari.

Hindu delegates included princes, such as the maharajas of Alwar, Bikaner and Dholpur, Hindu moderates such as Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar and Hindu nationalists such as M.R. Jayakar and Dr B.S. Moonje. The latter was an especially strident voice against Muslim interests at the conference. Moonje had trained as a medical doctor before devoting his life to politics and social reform. He had been an early supporter of the nationalist B.G. Tilak, but became increasingly attracted to Hindu communal organisation and community protection in the face of a perceived Muslim threat. Moonje helped establish organisations to promote military training of Hindu youths in aid of community 'defence', in addition to acting as president of the Hindu Mahasabha (a national body formed to protect the rights of Hindus) from 1927 to 1933.⁴¹ It was in this role that he secured his invitation to the RTC, throughout which he kept a detailed personal diary, which is used below to explore the playing out of communal politics on the journeys to and from Britain. The paper also draws widely upon personal and private archives. While some sources provide us with sustained narratives of life aboard ship (diaries, and some official files) much of the information comes from snatches of information in newspaper reports, in letters written on ship, and in the observations of governors and civil servants. The focus here is on life at sea, but never absent of an historical or archival connection to the land.

³⁶ R.S. Mantena, Anticolonialism and federation in colonial India, *Ab Imperio* 3 (2018) 36–62.

³⁷ Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire*; B. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States*, Cambridge, 2004.

³⁸ C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge, 2011.

³⁹ V. Thakur, Liberal, liminal and lost: India's first diplomats and the narrative of foreign policy, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45 (2017) 232–258.

⁴⁰ W. Gould, *Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia*, Cambridge, 2012.

⁴¹ D.E.U. Baker, *Changing Political Leadership in an Indian Province: the Central Provinces and Berar, 1919–1939*, Delhi, 1979.

Floating conferences

In this section the delegates' ships are portrayed as places of work, extending the space of the conference through the Mediterranean, Red and Arabian Seas into the Indian ports of embarkation and the towns and cities in which the delegates lived. After portraying how sea travel was anticipated on land, showing how delegates prepared for their departure, connections to land while at sea will be demonstrated, through the use of radio, mail and telegrams. The actual work that delegates did at sea will be explored, as recorded in commentaries by government officials and newspaper reporters as well as in Moonje's diaries, which show that the communal divisions which would stymie the conference were already in motion at sea.

The delegates' journeys began with an invitation from the British government, following which the Government of India undertook to fund double first-class berths on P&O steamers to London from Bombay, including trains across France from Marseilles. Some delegates, who had the ear of government officials or had official roles, received more notice than others and were better able to plan their departures. Money could also facilitate a smoother exit. The Maharajah of Bikaner, for instance, had money, fame (his London parties, and his dancing at them, were widely reported in the British press) and official stature. For public record he had his programme of travel to the second RTC session printed, detailing a full three-week itinerary between his Rajput kingdom in north India and London.⁴²

While the Maharaja of Bikaner was part of the seasoned traveller elite, for many Indian delegates the novelty of the London voyage made it a stressful one. As a newspaper article entitled 'India in London' suggested on 26th July 1930, ahead of the first session of the RTC, 'It is fully realised here that Indians do not make the trip to Europe with the same easy nonchalance that an European [sic] journeys to India, and that more time, therefore, is required for consideration and preparation'.⁴³ Despite this, for the journalist and Hindu social reformer N.C. Kelkar, time for consideration was precisely what he did not have. In a conference memoir he later recalled being informally invited to the third session of the RTC on 12th October 1932. On 24th October he saw his name published in an official communiqué, but his formal invitation only arrived the following day. This left him with just four days to prepare, pack and travel the one hundred miles from Poona to Bombay to board the SS Rawalpindi on the 29th. Having been given a 'big send off' by the Hindu community in Poona, within just a fortnight he was being greeted by 'a number of Maharashtriyans' in London.⁴⁴

The relative shortness of time given to prepare their journeys meant that it was difficult for delegates to coordinate their plans. The government's insistence on using P&O ships, which left Bombay weekly on a Saturday (with some Wednesday journeys), made it difficult to guarantee travelling with colleagues, or avoiding others. So, for the second session of the RTC, twenty-six delegates departed Bombay on the P&O SS Mooltan on 15th August 1931.⁴⁵ They included four 'Ruling Princes' and representatives of almost all the political persuasions of British India. This included the only two female delegates, the Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs Subbarayan, the federal constitutionalists Colonel K.N. Haksar and Tej Bahadur

⁴² Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust Archive [hereafter MGSTA] pad 98/file 1622.

⁴³ India in London, July 26th 1930, clipping from NA Home (Political)/1931/48/II, newspaper title not listed.

⁴⁴ N. Kelkar, *A Report on My Work at the Third Indian Round Table Conference*, Poona, 1933, i and iii.

⁴⁵ British National Archives PRO30/69/1527, James Ramsay MacDonald and predecessors and successors: Papers and Correspondence, 'Delegates'.

Sapru and the Khilafatist Muslim radical Maulana Shaukat Ali. The depressed castes ('untouchables') campaigner Dr B.N. Ambedkar travelled alongside the Hindu nationalists Dr Moonje and M.R. Jayakar. Businessmen such as E.C. Benthall, Gavin Jones and Sir P.C. Mitter journeyed with the trade unionist N.M. Joshi. But perhaps the passenger list to attract the most global attention was that of the SS Rajputana which departed Bombay on 29th August 1931, carrying a small number of delegates.⁴⁶ Alongside the ruling prince delegates H.H. the Nawab of Bhopal and the Raja of Korea, and the princely advisor Sir P. Pattani, were two Congress affiliated delegates, Pandit M.M. Malaviya and Mrs Sarojini Naidu, and the only official Congress delegate to attend the conference, M.K. Gandhi, with whose experiences this paper will conclude.

The steamer journeys that these delegates took to and from London distended the space-time of the Round Table Conference. Temporally, the ships became pre- and post-conferences, allowing delegates to prepare in advance and to digest the outcomes of the three conference sessions. Geographically, the ships mostly functioned as hermetically sealed units, focusing the mind on what was to come or upon what had come to pass. But the ships were not out of communication with land for the entire journey. At points along the route, mail and telegrams could be received and dispatched, newspapers purchased and wireless broadcasts received, which enabled work to carry on relatively up to date with the outside world.

The Calcutta-based merchant E.C. Benthall kept a detailed diary during his visits to London for the RTC, and it gives hints of the technology connecting the ship to the outward world.⁴⁷ For the second session he had departed Bombay on 15th August aboard the SS Mooltan and on the 27th August he received news 'in the middle of the Red Sea' of the death of a friend, but the real news people had been waiting for was whether Gandhi would decide to come to the conference or not.⁴⁸ Due to concerns about the upholding of the terms of the March 1931 pact with Viceroy Irwin, Gandhi had cancelled his decision to attend the conference, although he would later relent and leave Bombay on the 29th August. The absence of Congress at the first session of the RTC had been its major flaw, and the lack of information about developments in India during the journey out for the RTC's second session had clearly disturbed the passengers. As Benthall put it, 'The voyage has been taken up half with speculation as to the coming of Gandhi: for half the voyage this overrode all constitutional questions. For the last few days however there has been no news of India and the whole interest has been concerned in the formation of the National Government at home'.⁴⁹

During Moonje's first outward journey he reported, on 11th October 1930, there being a 'mail day' before docking at Suez.⁵⁰ In terms of receiving information, these stops were sporadic and the patchy information received could be as distracting as it was useful. During his journey to the second RTC session Moonje reported, on 22nd August 1931, having heard a wireless news broadcast, while in the Red Sea, reporting that the commissioner of Dacca had been fired at, which left the English travellers aboard sullen and silent at the news. On the return journey he received news in the Mediterranean on 4th January 1932 that Gandhi and Vallabhai Patel had

been arrested in India (he noted that 'English passengers seemed relieved'), marking the beginning of the second phase of civil disobedience.⁵¹

The ship was, therefore, a fitful place to receive information. However, the scheduled docking sites and times did mean that delegates could prepare messages to send in peace. There were a variety of options open to delegates, of various costs, for communicating with the outside world. On 3rd January 1932, as Moonje passed through the Mediterranean on his return from the second RTC session, he had sent a 'Post Radio Telegram' to a friend in France. The telegram was sent to a ship that would arrive in Marseilles the following day, when the message would be transcribed and sent to Paris.⁵² The boats also provided a space and time to write and send letters of thanks to officials and friends in London who had welcomed the delegates during the conference sessions. The private papers of Lord Sankey, the lord chancellor and chair of the RTC's Federal Structure Committee, contain letters written on P&O SS letterheads, thanking him for his help. Others wrote using their formally embossed stationery, amended to include the steamer and location of mailing. So on 21st January 1931 the Nawab of Bhopal posted a letter from the SS Narkunda, docked at Port Said, opening his letter with a frank description of his journey so far: 'I am on my way back to Bhopal, not enjoying the voyage, but lying in bed with fever brought about by influenza, which I got as I was leaving London'.⁵³

The Nawab had his own personal staff on board, to take dictation and post his letters, as did the Maharajah of Bikaner (a staff of thirteen), who was famed for his work ethic. His published programme of travel, mentioned earlier, also included agents and telegram addresses in Aden, Suez, Port Said, Marseilles, Paris and London, so that correspondence could reach him regularly throughout his trip. His staff also compiled regular lists of work on board. A note for 3rd – 4th November 1931, for instance, listed work to be done between Port Said and Bombay on the return journey from the second session of the RTC, including drafting replies to messages received at Suez, planning visits within India, and checking the draft of an interview he had given to the *Times of India* newspaper.⁵⁴

The bureaucratic work undertaken on board has left the most abundant traces in the archive.⁵⁵ Less documented but still widely commented on were the discussions, both more or less formal, that took place between delegates on-board. The activities of these delegates were dwelt upon from the highest of levels of government in India, pondering their journey, to the daily press in the UK, awaiting their arrival. Indeed, the journeys were clearly less boring to government officials and newspaper readers than to those at sea. Both of these sorts of accounts give a sense of the intense work taking place on the journeys to and from Britain.

On 6th October 1930 the viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, wrote to his father, the Earl of Halifax, that most of the delegates had been despatched to the first session of the RTC, 'and they will no doubt be relieved to be out of the arena of political pressure and abuse'.⁵⁶ While the conditions on-board may not have been as intense as

⁴⁶ MGSTA pad 373/file 7647.

⁴⁷ On telecommunications and ocean liners, see J.R. Hume, *Shipbuilding: speed, safety and comfort*, in: D. Finamore and G. Wood (Eds), *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style*, London, 2018, 72–87.

⁴⁸ Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge, Papers of Sir Edward Benthall, box 2 [hereafter Benthall/2], file '1931–32', 181, diary entry for 27th August 1931.

⁴⁹ Benthall/2, file '1931–32', 181, diary entry for 27th August 1931.

⁵⁰ Nehru Memorial Museum and Library/BS Moonje Papers/Microfilm roll 1 [hereafter Moonje/1], 11th October 1930.

⁵¹ Nehru Memorial Museum and Library/BS Moonje Papers/Microfilm roll 2 [hereafter Moonje/2], 4th January 1932.

⁵² Moonje/2, 3rd January 1932.

⁵³ Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Papers of John Sankey, Viscount Sankey of Moreton, MSS. Eng. Hist. c.538.

⁵⁴ MGSTA pad 372/file 6283.

⁵⁵ Some delegates attempted to travel early so as to avoid travelling with other delegates and focus on reading and preparation, see H.A. Popley, *KT Paul: Christian Leader*, Calcutta, 1938, 187.

⁵⁶ British Library, London, India Office Records and Private Papers [hereafter BL IOR], Mss Eur C152.27.

those of India under the civil disobedience movement, news soon reached Irwin of the pre-conference debates taking place on the steamers. On 31st October the secretary of state for India, William Wedgwood Benn, wrote to Irwin of the delegates: 'As you know, on the ship they had a great many conversations about the communal question. Jehangir, who was with me this morning, tells me that he hopes for a good issue from this'.⁵⁷

Irwin would also receive informal letters from colleagues who were travelling to London on business not connected to the RTC, but who spoke to delegates on-board. The finance minister, Sir George Schuster, used his journey home to dwell on constitutional questions he had discussed with the viceroy, but also to sound out the views of Sir Akbar Hydari, the influential conference delegate and chief minister of the princely state of Hyderabad. In his memoirs Schuster recalls Hydari outlining his plans to propose a federation of princely and British India, which were far more advanced than the Government of India suspected.⁵⁸ On docking at Aden Schuster telephoned the viceroy, who asked for something written from Hydari and for reports from Schuster, one of which he posted from Aden, and the second from London.⁵⁹

The press also had its reporters aboard. The *Times of India* published accounts from its correspondent on the RMS Viceroy of India, which were then picked up and republished by the *Times* in London. It reported that 'daily exchanges of views and numerous minor conferences are being held', with a division of opinion forming over the likelihood of Britain granting India dominion status.⁶⁰ The press were able to report on similar activities on the return journey in January 1931 after the first session of the RTC concluded. The *Times* had a special correspondent aboard the RMS Viceroy of India again, who filed a report at Port Said on January 28th that was published in London the following day. The large number of delegates on board were said to be on good form and enjoying a rest after the strenuous weeks of the conference:

At the same time, a lot of useful discussion is proceeding informally, and if the Conference came to an official end at St. James's Palace its work is going on here on board. To a fellow passenger the most notable fact is the obviously cordial relations between all the delegates, whether Hindu or Muslim, Ruling Prince or representative of British India.⁶¹

The *Times* would report the following week that further delegates had held 'a series of informal yet none the less important conferences since the ship left Port Said. Naturally, no official decisions have been arrived at, as the party, large though it may be, does not include many of the leading delegates'.⁶² While nothing official could be announced, when the ship docked in Bombay on 6th February the delegates had prepared a press release which, the *Times'* special correspondent was able to report, was the result of prolonged travail, including an 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. session on the ship the day before to finalise the draft: 'There has been, in effect, another round-table conference in the Viceroy of India's dining

saloon to produce this manifesto'.⁶³ This harmonious vision fails to represent, however, the communal divisions that would ultimately stymie the conference.

Dr Moonje's communal journey

Moonje's diary, kept aboard the RMS Viceroy of India during his journey to Europe in October 1930, and throughout his time there, presents us with an account of the intense work that took place during the journey.⁶⁴ It also comprises an unintentional travelogue, narrating a world viewed through explicitly Hindu eyes. Moonje was consumed by the conviction that the Muslim delegates were more calculating and better organised than Hindus. Even before the Viceroy of India departed, on 4th October 1930, Moonje had noted that a large and loud crowd of Muslims had been assembled to cheer off the Ali brothers and M.A. Jinnah.⁶⁵ In comparison, of the 'Gandhi Cap' wearing Hindus none dared raise a cry, and appeared to him crestfallen. The following day Moonje reported a conversation with the economist and Muslim delegate Dr Shafaat Ahmed Khan. He reported Khan's surprise at Moonje attending the RTC, given that Congress was boycotting the conference and that Moonje had supported the civil disobedience movement.⁶⁶ Khan found Moonje's published statements that he had joined the conference to oppose Muslim interests to be very frank. Moonje apparently replied that frankness at times pays more than diplomacy, and that he had nothing to conceal. While he despaired over the weakness of other Hindu delegates, he believed that he would be the stumbling point for the concerted Muslim bloc. Moonje found the liberal Hindu delegate Sir A.P. Patro to be particularly contemptible. On 6th October he reported that Patro was trying to revive on-board a failed 'peace conference' between Hindus and Muslims that he had organised in Delhi that May. While Moonje felt that Muslims should come to him, he agreed to attend Patro's meeting the following morning at 10.30.

The meeting took place in cabin 329 and Moonje described it as a meeting of two 'sides', one of five Muslims (including Jinnah, Shaukat Ali and Shafat Ahmed Khan) and one of seven Hindus.⁶⁷ The latter included Ambedkar, who was opposed to Brahmin (high caste) led discrimination, and Sapru, who pointedly distanced himself from any religious affiliation, in favour of his bi-partisan liberalism. While Moonje considered that Ali's presentation of the Muslim case was flawed, he also felt that they spoke with one mind, while the Hindus were unable to do likewise. Patro supported non-Brahmin causes, Ambedkar being openly anti-Brahmin, while the Hindu princes had been conversing with Ali and others, but not with Moonje. It was agreed that the group would meet again two days later, when Jinnah articulated the Muslim claims cleverly while the Hindus remained 'hopelessly divided'.⁶⁸ That evening Ambedkar approached Moonje on the forward deck of 'B' floor and reportedly made the case for Muslim separate electorates, without which Hindu-Muslim violence would continue. Moonje replied that he was not afraid of such violence, and that Muslims could not be trusted to honour their conference commitments.

The group met again the following day to debate the number of seats that would be reserved for Muslims in a central assembly, while in the afternoon Patro organised a social gathering of British Indian delegates and the on-board princes. The controversial

⁵⁷ BL IOR Mss Eur C152.6. Sir Cowasji Jehangir was a Parsi representative from Bombay.

⁵⁸ G. Schuster, *Private Work and Public Causes: A Personal Record, 1881–1978*, Cowbridge, 1979, 105.

⁵⁹ The correspondence is filed in NA Reforms/1930/170/30-R.

⁶⁰ Round Table Conference: two lines of thought, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20th October 1930.

⁶¹ Round-Table delegates: message to the viceroy: amnesty approved, *The Times*, 29th January 1931.

⁶² A manifesto to India: delegates' plan, *The Times*, 2nd February 1931.

⁶³ Round-Table delegates: a welcome at Bombay: statement issued: call for unity in India, *The Times*, 7th February 1931.

⁶⁴ For numerous photographs of the RMS Viceroy of India's interior see <http://www.pandosnco.co.uk/viceroy.htm>, last accessed on 29th January 2019.

⁶⁵ Moonje/1, 4th October 1930.

⁶⁶ Moonje/1, 5th October 1930.

⁶⁷ Moonje/1, 7th October 1930.

⁶⁸ Moonje/1, 9th October 1930.

Maharaja of Alwar (of whom more below) offered a concluding speech – ‘He spoke well and fluently though no body was impressed by it as they all know what kind of man he is’ – and the following day’s meeting took place in the drawing room of his cabin.⁶⁹ Despite hosting the meeting, Alwar claimed to be ‘quite at sea in the matter’ up for discussion.⁷⁰ It was decided to appoint a smaller committee to keep in touch with the princes on-board, upon which Alwar wanted Ali to sit:

A Hindu Raja showing reverence for a bigoted Muslim and none of them thinking of a counterpoise in me is a spectacle which points to the defeatist mentality which all Hindus have developed. They behave like they can’t do without Moslems who on their part aspire and conspire to swallow all into themselves from Maharajas to the lowest Hindu in the street.⁷¹

At the next meeting, on the 13th October, Moonje resisted calls for increased autonomy for the Muslim dominated regions of Sind and Baluchistan, at which the Hindu leaders ‘lost their cool’ bemoaning his lack of compromise and suggesting the meetings on board did little good and that it would be better if they didn’t meet again before London.⁷² The following day the Hindu members met alone, to effect a reconciliation, but Moonje was convinced that Patro was passing information to both Muslims and the government.⁷³

Moonje’s record of working on board gives a sense of the locations (rooms, cabins, decks) in which pre-conferencing took place, and the fractures that had emerged between and within communities. But his observations of social activities on board make it clear how inseparable work and play were within the ship. He observed European couples dancing to gramophone music after dinner, but found their music lacking in melody, and the dancing lacking in artistry, compared to Indian song and dance.⁷⁴ Even worse, however, were two Muslim singers at an evening party put on by Alwar. Moonje dismissed them as ‘no good’, and took umbrage at Alwar selecting two Urdu songs, one with the message that ‘all are children of the same god’. Shaukat Ali reportedly, in reference to the song, asked why Moonje would discriminate between Hindus and Muslims, to which he asked in reply, if all people were the same, why should Muslims have separate electorates?⁷⁵ For Moonje, the ship was a place of political intrigue and social despair at cross-communal empathy and intra-communal disunity. Others viewed social life on-board differently, but a recurring feature was the sense that the passengers represented a microcosm of India’s social geography, and of its future.

A seaborne society

In this section the conference ships are portrayed as places of socialisation in which government advisors and others honed their opinions of Indian delegates. The press feasted on the opportunity to observe members of the Indian elite up close, emphasising in particular the differences between British Indian and princely delegates. For British official and press opinion, these observations were unnerving, providing ample evidence of India’s claim for constitutional advance. For most delegates, this was evidence of their sameness. For one delegate, with whom the paper concludes, the evidence was of his radical difference.

In terms of observations during travel, one of the few things that continued to excite sea travellers in the modern age were the tensions produced by social classes rubbing up against each other in such a relatively confined space.⁷⁶ The steamers were famously segregated by class, with first and second class saloons for passengers (and wholly separate quarters for staff), while in 1932 P&O launched the new SS Strathnaver and SS Strathaird which featured ‘tourist class’ fares. However, every RTC delegate was eligible for a first class ticket so the opportunities for transgressing the usually stringently observed official, caste and class hierarchies were rife. Delegates engaged in commentary on the other passengers to pass the time, relishing the opportunity to connect personalities aboard ship to their public performances.

Schuster, who sent his views on the Hyderabad delegation to Viceroy Irwin, was himself under observation by the Bengal commercial delegate, E.C. Benthall. On 26th September 1930, while in the Red Sea, Benthall recorded in his diary that: ‘On board we have Schuster, immaculate as ever, doing his 7 to 8 miles of walking a day and putting in a lot of work. Ruth [Benthall’s wife] ... gets on well with him & he is developing his sense of humour on her lines’.⁷⁷ He was felt to epitomise the ‘very best men’ that Britain must send out to India. Benthall, like Schuster, was also drawn to comment on the seaborne society:

The Hyderabad contingent is on board; one delegate, Sir Akbar Hydari and 20 assistants! Sir A.H. is a fancy little man with a small beard, always seeking for information: very clever I should think but wants watching. Sir R Chevenix-Trench, sound, fairly masterful but rather opinionated is their European advisor. From Gwalior we have Sir Sultan Ahmed, the Vice-President of the Council, an exceedingly nice old man to meet, a fair bridge player with a tendency to overcall but who plays his cards well!! Perhaps the same in politics. We shall see.⁷⁸

This ambivalent commentary mixes intellectual respect with a customary colonial blend of belittling (‘fancy’, ‘little’) and debasing (‘watching’, ‘overcalling’) rhetoric, a trope shared across British delegates and commentators.⁷⁹ In a letter to a colleague in India on 12th January 1931, when entering the last week of the RTC’s first session in London, Benthall confirmed his views of Hydari and Trench, but also hinted at the long-lasting political significance of the friendships forged aboard the outward steamer:

I met little Hydari again not having seen him for some two or three weeks, and Trench pointed out to what a singular extent the principles which he had communicated on the voyage home [to London] had been accepted by the Conference. Looking back this is so, and Hydari was good enough to say that he had been strengthened in his persistence by the support of his fellow passengers! I mention this because it takes us back a long way as things have moved and it must be clearly understood that any question of responsibility is of course obviously dependent upon the State coming into Federation on Hydari’s lines. On the ship that factor struck me as altering the whole problem, and it is equally vital to-day.⁸⁰

Benthall also recorded his impressions during his journey to the UK for the second session on the SS Mooltan (as recounted above). In

⁶⁹ Moonje/1, 10th October 1930.

⁷⁰ Moonje/1, 11th October 1930.

⁷¹ Moonje/1, 11th October 1930.

⁷² Moonje/1, 13th October 1930.

⁷³ Moonje/1, 14th October 1930.

⁷⁴ Moonje/1, 5th October 1930.

⁷⁵ Moonje/1, 14th October 1930.

⁷⁶ Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom*, 27.

⁷⁷ Benthall/7, 53, diary entry for 26th September 1930.

⁷⁸ Benthall/7, 53, diary entry for 26th September 1930.

⁷⁹ See D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Durham, NC, 1993; S. Legg, Ambivalent improvements: biography, biopolitics, and colonial Delhi, *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2008) 37–56.

⁸⁰ Benthall/7, 131, letter to Sir George Godfrey, 12th January 1931.

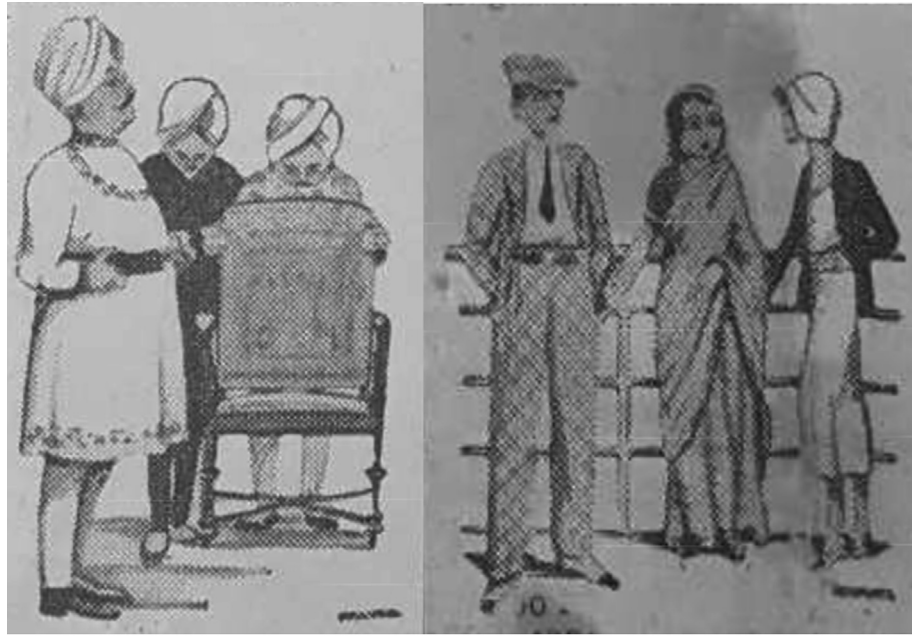


Fig. 1. With a boatload of princes, *Daily Mail*, 17th February 1931.

addition to his comments on speculation about Gandhi's participation in the conference, he described some of the everyday social negotiations taking place on board. He had two colleagues travelling with him, with whom he sat at the ship doctor's table in the dining salon. He sketched ship life, deprecating the Muslim fanfare given in Bombay, which had so impressed Moonje, who was not coping well with life at sea:

Our fellow delegates are scattered over the ship and it is interesting to see to what extent they fraternise. Shaukat Ali, gigantic & patriarchal, is left severely alone, being a wild man. So is Dadabhoy, for another reason: poor old man is very lonely I think Shaukat was seen off by his Khilafat volunteers: a more rag time [sic] army you never saw; but it is a distinct change from last year and shows which way the wind is blowing. The militant Moonje has for two days lain on the sofa at the top of the stairway to the dining room, of all places, with a little water and a very large basin. His interest in the army is not likely to extend to the navy.⁸¹

Special attention was reserved for the princes, not just for their political and collective decision to favour a federation with British India, but also for their lifestyle on-board. These observations worked to perpetuate the sense of Indian difference and divisions, fitting neatly into the British narrative of a subcontinent still in need of the moderating hand of imperial governance. The *Times* reported that on the RMS Viceroy of India an (unnamed) prince had four large cabins knocked into one and a parquet floor laid down to provide a sitting room 'commensurate with his dignity' for the return journey in January 1931.⁸² Accompanying a large number of delegates on the return leg was Sir Percival Phillips, a decorated war

journalist and social commentator, who posted an article from the Red Sea for the *Daily Mail* entitled 'With a Boatload of Princes', claiming that 'We have India in miniature in this Bombay liner. The passenger-list is top heavy with princes, and their retinue dominate the colour scheme'. Phillips found this scene to be instructive, assembling many of the elements threatening to pull down the Empire, but who were:

... as loosely knit and as reluctant to coalesce as India herself. The camouflage of the London conference was shed with winter kit. Princes and politicians have put off their Round Table faces. Now that we have passed the frontier of Europe the East is once again undisguised. Factions whisper in secluded corners of the ship and the dreadful disease induced by undigested politics has reappeared in virulent form. While they argue let us look them over. A walk around the ship will reveal many odd things not seen when these people were in London.⁸³

Phillips regurgitates much of the slack orientalism of the tabloid press: assuming that without British overlordship India would descend into internecine strife; marvelling that Indians spoke such good English (especially between themselves); praising the fine Western dress of the Princes (which also marked their capitulation to Western style); and wondering at the Indian women and girls, now out of purdah and spending evenings on the sanded promenade deck, watching the dancing late into the night (see the article's cartoons in Fig. 1).⁸⁴ But he also notes the jarring and disturbing cracks in imperial order that this mimicry created.⁸⁵ While the delegates' spoken English was excellent, it had the 'sing-song cadences of the native born; words and syllables interlocked at a dead-level; intelligible enough, but here and there a

⁸¹ Benthall/2, file 'Gandhi', 181, diary entry for 27th August 1931. Sir Maneckji Byramji Dadabhoy was a Parsi representative from Bombay. Moonje was interested in British military colleges and sat on the RTC committee that worked toward establishing an 'Indian Sandhurst' at Dehra Dun.

⁸² Round-Table delegates: message to the viceroy: amnesty approved, *The Times*, 29th January 1931.

⁸³ [P. Phillips], With a boatload of princes, *Daily Mail*, 17th February 1931.

⁸⁴ For comparable commentaries on delegates in London, see S. Legg, 'Political Atmospherics': the India Round Table Conference's atmospheric environments, bodies and representations, London 1930–32, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, forthcoming.

⁸⁵ H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, 1994, 85.

phrase strangely fashioned'.⁸⁶ While the princes resided in the most modern quarters, 'The alleyway leading to the cabins de luxe is heavy with the scent of burning sandalwood'. And, most unnerving, a young English footman had been hired by one of the princes and was treated with curiosity by other 'native servants He is one of them, yet an outsider'.

Amongst the princes, one was singled out as especially ostentatious, refusing to wear Western dress and only eating with his staff once the dining room had been emptied after nine in the evening. This almost certainly refers to the Maharaja of Alwar, who also features heavily in a gossipy letter written by Dame Edith Lyttelton – the widow of a colonial secretary and a campaigner and author in her own right – who was on the same boat to India. Despite an opening that confirmed the monotony of writing about the monotony of sea travel ('There is not much one can say that is not absolutely stale about Board ship'), Lyttelton went on to provide seven typed pages of richly textured observations about the RTC delegates.⁸⁷ While the ship carried the Maharajah of Bikaner, the Begum Shah Nawaz, Tej Bahadur Sapru, Sastri and dozens more, she found it difficult to secure conversations with them due to their incessant playing of bridge and the 'endless discussions' that were going on about conference business.

Alwar was clearly a subject of fascination for her. She confirmed Phillips' account, noting that the maharaja did not mix with other passengers, never wore Western dress, dined alone and was rumoured to have four wives in purdah below deck (one of whom was said to be pregnant, but was not allowed to see the other Indian women on board, much to their apparent resentment). He did, however, participate in a 'fancy dress ball', an institutionalised form of mimicry with endless opportunities for mishap between delegates. Perhaps because of this, very few Indians were said to have joined in, 'though one pretended to be a Goanese Steward, and of course simply looked like one, so I am bound to say did a young Englishman as a deck steward'.⁸⁸ Bikaner was dancing on deck as usual, with some of the minor princes, but this evening Alwar made an entrance with his staff and took a seat next to Lyttelton, giving her chance for a close appraisal:

He had large square opals, about five in each clasp of the two at his waist, a string of rubies round his neck, his vest studded with pink topaz and a magnificent ruby ring on one hand and an emerald on the other. He has a strange face, a forehead which overhangs his nose and mouth like the story [sic] of a house which juts out a little, big lustrous eyes, a goodish nose, and an underlip which sticks out beyond the upper one, and a small well modelled chin. His skin is very dark and his long flexible hands even have dark palms. He is very tall and has a fine figure.⁸⁹

After this combination of the racial body profiling of the typical Indian with the commentary on excessive ornamentation regularly applied to the princes, Lyttelton described Alwar's conversation, and the playing out of a mimicry drama staged in the cracks between social hierarchies that the ship had forced together. Alwar joked that he had suggested the captain apply a 'not wanted on voyage' label to the Maharajah of Bikaner, over which they shared a laugh, although she felt his to be 'rather terrible prolonged, sensual, witless'.⁹⁰ By this point the man described as the Indian delegate

dressed as a Goanese steward (who she refers to as a RTC delegate named 'Bhose') was quite drunk, and approached Alwar in over-familiar terms, demanding a cigarette.⁹¹ Lyttelton noticed a smile on Alwar's face that she felt should have warned Bhose, but he missed it. Alwar took out a black and white striped handkerchief and produced two gold coins, which he grandly handed over, in place of a cigarette. Bhose tried to refuse, but Alwar said something in Hindustani (he later explained that it meant 'with my good will') and the coins were taken. Undeterred, Bhose pressed his demand, the Alwar staff relented, and he finally left with a lit cigarette. Lyttelton commented that the delegate had been 'a little gay' that night, which Alwar said was no bad thing, but that 'Bikanir [sic] does not like me because I am gay and he is not gay at all'. This incident shows how ship life could create, expose or exacerbate tensions which might not have emerged, or would have lain dormant, on land. Lyttelton's racial orientalism, Alwar's aloofness, the pleasures and perils of colonial mimicry and intra-generational princely anxiety emerge here as special products of socialising on the journey to and from the RTC.

At sea, the hierarchies of Indian society were amplified rather than dampened by the close proximity on-board ship. Journalists and fellow travellers reported on the racial and social divisions at play, reading them as miniatures of both the geography of India and of the moment of rapid political change it was experiencing. This took place in a paradigmatic object of interwar high society, the ocean liner, which was precisely why this space was so effectively overturned by the RTC's most famous delegate.

M.K. Gandhi's spiritual journey

The nationalist hagiography around Gandhi has, rightly, been criticised, as has the way in which he is taken as a synecdoche for all Indian nationalism, eradicating both its diversity and Gandhi's indebtedness to liberal, leftist, and even communal ideologies.⁹² But there is also a need to understand how M.K. Gandhi became and functioned as the 'Mahatma' (great soul), what his practical proposals were for politics and the state, how he operated as a political realist as much as a spiritual ascetic, and how his campaigning worked at a day-to-day level.⁹³ Gandhi at sea provides us with a new space through which to observe both his specific tactics and his broader strategy for transforming British and Indian politics.

After much vacillation, Gandhi eventually departed Bombay aboard the SS Rajputana on 29th August 1931.⁹⁴ Being a late departure, there were few other delegates on board, so Gandhi had fewer business meetings. The *Daily Telegraph's* special correspondent could report from Port Said, however, that the Nawab of Bhopal 'had several long conferences during the voyage' under the newspaper article's sub-heading 'conferences in liner'.⁹⁵ But this is not to say that Gandhi's journey failed to prepare him, or his fellow delegates and the British population, for the conference. Gandhi

⁹¹ There was no RTC delegate named Bhose (or Bose), although Lyttelton repeats his status and name several times.

⁹² W. Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, Cambridge, 2004.

⁹³ S. Amin, Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2, in: R. Guha (Ed), *Subaltern Studies III*, Delhi, 1984, 1–61; A. Parel, Gandhi and the state, in: J. Brown and A. Parel (Eds), *Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, Cambridge, 2011, 154–172; K. Mantena, Another realism: the politics of Gandhian nonviolence, *American Political Science Review* 106 (2012) 455–470; Guha, *Gandhi*.

⁹⁴ For reflections on the role of such journeys in forging the identities of Indian nationalists, see J. Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal*, London, 2007.

⁹⁵ Round Table Conference: waiting for Mr Gandhi, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8th September 1931.

⁸⁶ [Phillips], With a boatload of princes.

⁸⁷ Churchill College Archives, University of Cambridge, CHAN II/4/22: Letter from Dame Edith Lyttelton, 1st February 1931 to an unidentified correspondent.

⁸⁸ Letter from Dame Edith Lyttelton, 1st February 1931.

⁸⁹ Letter from Dame Edith Lyttelton, 1st February 1931.

⁹⁰ Letter from Dame Edith Lyttelton, 1st February 1931.

worked throughout his journey, with fellow delegates Sarojini Naidu and Madan Mahan Malaviya, and with his secretary Mahadev Desai and his English born 'disciple' Mirabeen. He also gave numerous interviews to journalists, which were widely reported in the British and Indian press. But what perhaps garnered most attention was Gandhi's mode of life aboard ship.

Unlike the other delegates, Gandhi and his four members of staff took two three-berthed cabins on the second-class deck, as did Pandit Malaviya, although Sarojini Naidu opted to take up her first class saloon on the upper deck.⁹⁶ Rather than dressing for dinner, taking energetic walks around the deck or dancing to the gramophone, Gandhi spent his time meeting other second-class travellers, eating food specially prepared for him, and spinning cotton into cloth (an economic statement against British imports and a spiritual statement in favour of quiet contemplation).⁹⁷ *The Graphic* magazine later published photographs of Gandhi aboard the Rajputana (see Fig. 2), also placing him on the front cover. Here it was explained that for twelve years Gandhi had maintained a vow of silence on Mondays, a practice he would keep up throughout the conference. This was said to be a perfect demonstration of his status as both politician and ascetic: 'he asserts that religion gives meaning to life, while politics are his avenues of expressing it'.⁹⁸

The press clamoured for more details of Gandhi's upending of the conventions of life aboard an ocean liner. Subsequent articles both enhanced his reputation as a major political force while simultaneously belittling and debasing him as a crank. A Reuters report from the Red Sea was published by several newspapers on September 4th, the *Daily Telegraph's* version appearing under the title 'Gandhi's Rites on Board Ship: Silent Ghost-like Figure; Allowed to Steer the Liner; Curious Items of Baggage'. Unlike the other delegates, Gandhi had foregone his deluxe cabin to sleep on a 'crude wooden bench', but his characterisation as ghost-like was due to the strictness with which he carried out his religious rituals, 'which contrast strangely with the social life on board':

Huddled up on a wooden bench in the stern of the vessel, hidden from head to foot in a shimmering white shroud, which rustled uncannily in the stiff sea breeze, his form presents a ghost like appearance. Passengers gaze with amazement at the apparition, and ask 'Who is it?' ... A weird scene is witnessed as darkness falls over the turbulent seas, and the Mahatma, rising from his bench, summons his small flock of followers to prayer. Dressed in white flowing robes and looking like biblical prophets, they squat on deck, with hands clasped, heads bowed, and eyes closed in meditation British officials and business men returning from the East on holiday look silently on. As the Rajputana rises and falls in the wind-lashed seas, the voice of the Mahatma rises above those of his followers in an appeal to Providence to light the path of the Round Table delegates.⁹⁹

In reciprocation, the following Sunday Gandhi's favourite hymn ('Lead, Kindly Light') was sung during the morning service on board. He was said to have stopped his 'almost ceaseless spinning' to join the singing: 'When the Mahatma first appeared in his scanty loincloth before the improvised altar, draped with the Union Jack,

the appearance of a medieval ascetic somewhat startled the other worshippers'.¹⁰⁰

While the Reuters report on Gandhi's rituals on board was republished in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Manchester Guardian* and *News Chronicle* as well as the *Daily Telegraph*, it was only the *Daily Express* that decided to lead with a minor detail from the original report: 'Gandhi's Friend the Cat: Queer Cargo of "Conference Ship"'.¹⁰¹ Gandhi's aloofness was said to have made him lonely, hence he had befriended the ship's cat, sharing his goat's milk by day and his mattress by night. The report also suggested (falsely) that while the orthodox Hindu Madan Mahan Malaviya had been denied permission to bring a sacred cow with him, he had brought 120 quarts of ritualistic pasteurised milk for the journey, as well as twenty gallons of water from the sacred Ganges river, for ablution and drinking, and a ton of mud from the Ganges' banks, from which he could craft gods for worshipping purposes.

When in London Gandhi would stay with the pacifist and campaigner Murial Lester in the East End. She would later reflect on her hosting of Gandhi, the reactions of the British press to him, and her frustration at the lack of serious engagement with his message. Instead, the public were treated to column after column about irrelevancies, trivialities and obsessions with his 'loincloth' and goat's milk diet.¹⁰² She pointed out that Gandhi was actually well covered by his dhoti and shawl, whereas the subject of goats quickly became a very threadbare jest: 'We heard that a flock of them was to be stabled on our roof, that he liked to watch his goat being milked, and many other silly lies all tending to portray an egoistic, eccentric oddity'. The SS Rajputa's cargo of holy mud was also dismissed as just one in a constant succession of fairy tales issued by the press. Part fascination, part politically motivated instances of the rhetoric of empire (idealisation, insubstantialisation and naturalisation), these ship stories show how the journey to the Round Table Conference did another vital piece of work for Gandhi.¹⁰³ Beyond the political objectives of the RTC, Gandhi openly admitted that his aim was to reach out to the British people directly, to win them over to his campaign for India's freedom, which would also free the British from their morally corrupting empire. This reaching out began, via the press, in the Red Sea, and extended, through his visits to the palaces of London and the textile mills of Lancashire, into the consciousness of the British public.

Conclusion

Accompanying the delegates of the first RTC session back to India in February 1931, Dame Lytton noted the Maharaja of Bikaner's surprise that the viceroy had not known in advance that the princes had decided to support a federation with British India. The decision had shocked many, but fellow passengers accompanying Moonje and others on the RMS Viceroy of India on the way to London would likely have been aware of the delegates' daily meetings and heated debates about federalism and communal representation.

This paper has drawn on disparate archives to explore some of these ship-board debates as a means of thinking in new ways about the spatial relationality of an historical event. The Round Table Conference clearly began and ended both before and after its official timeline, and anticipated and continued its work way

⁹⁶ Non-violence and truth: Mr Gandhi on his mission, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 30th August 1931.

⁹⁷ For a description of life on board see Naidu's letter to her children, written in the Gulf of Suez on 6th September 1931, M. Paranjape (Ed), *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, New Delhi, 2010, 246.

⁹⁸ The Mahatma in our midst, *The Graphic*, 19th September 1931.

⁹⁹ Gandhi's rites on board ship, *Daily Telegraph*, 4th September 1931.

¹⁰⁰ Mr Gandhi sings English hymn, *News Chronicle*, 7th September 1931.

¹⁰¹ Gandhi's friend the cat: queer cargo of 'conference ship', *Daily Express*, 4th September 1931.

¹⁰² Lester, *Entertaining Gandhi*, 34.

¹⁰³ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*.



Fig. 2. Sidelights on a mahatma, *The Graphic*, 19th September 1931.

beyond the confines of St James's Palace. Tracing the conference work at sea allows a mobile perspective on interwar imperialism, anti-colonialism and Indian nationalism, showing how they emerged in motion and in microcosm in these ocean liners. Refusing any neat dichotomy between land and sea, the delegates' journeys began on land while intermittent communications strung the ships between lines of information that were broadcast from the coast.

Life aboard ship has been shown to have its own geographies and mobilities, in which delegates moved between places of work and society, networking together accommodation, decks, bars and

restaurants, much as the conference would do in London. Delegates got to know each other and were able to debate their views on India's constitutional future. They tested how delegates and observers who were kept apart by location and social hierarchies in India would work in conjunction at the conference. This provided rich material for commentators who wanted to emphasise Indian difference and ill-preparedness for independence. For Moonje, the opportunities for Hindu-Muslim fraternisation that the RMS Viceroy of India created were abhorrent. For Gandhi, the SS Rajputana provided a mobile platform upon which to display to the world's media his political message and social otherness. Alongside

Moonje and Gandhi, all the delegates were engaged in crafting their politics, whether imperial, liberal-nationalist or communal, in motion, beyond the bounds of the nation-state, through political lives at sea.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by AHRC grant AH/M008142/1. I would like to thank Mike Heffernan, Jake Hodder and Ben Thorpe, my fellow investigators on the grant, for their support throughout. For their comments on the script I would like to thank the three

anonymous reviewers and David Beckingham, Thom Davies and Ben Thorpe. The paper benefitted from discussion at the 2018 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) conference, in a session I co-organised with Jake Hodder entitled 'On being at sea: historically experiencing movement across the waves'. I am grateful to Andy Davies for discussion in and after this session. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Auerbach for sharing advance proofs of his then unpublished monograph, *Imperial Boredom*, and Miles Ogborn for his rigorous and generous editing. All mistakes are very much my own.