



THE TIMES OF INDIA

# Lost Labour

## India's Role in West Asian Oil

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**T**ODAY India's future in oil appears increasingly passive; as one of the two growing markets for companies such as Shell and Aramco. Yet, in the past it has played a significant role in the development of the world's energy resources.

Although large reserves of hydrocarbons in Assam, Bengal — now Bangladesh — and Myanmar — then part of India — had been discovered under the British, the government did not attempt to increase production. India was a unit in the Empire which served a certain role, there was no need for it to be self-sufficient. But when immediately after World War I, it was evident that enormous resources of petroleum were to be found in West Asia, the government of India took over the administration of virtually the entire region — with resources provided by the Indian taxpayer. The Indian Army was used repeatedly to keep the peace; never less than 25 per cent of it was overseas in the service of the Empire at any time.

### Indian Labour

In the territories mandated to Britain after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, several of the police forces were trained and for long even manned by policemen from India. And as the National Archives show — although the external affairs ministry persists in withholding documents even after 75 years in the name of national security — India contributed the labour which developed oilfields and refineries and operated them. They worked under conditions of near slavery. Beginning the first decade of the century, Indian workmen developed the Persian oilfields, built and thereafter operated the Abadan refinery of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (today British Petroleum), then the largest in the world.

Not just the labour but also the clerical staff and, in time, much of the management of Abadan was Indian. Pathans, Maharashtrians, Jews and Muslims, Tamils and South Indian Brahmins were among the communities represented by Indian indentured labour which went to so many places — South Africa and West Africa, Fiji, Ceylon the Far East — but was not allowed to settle in West Asia. Being dispersed on their return, they did not have a well-recorded histo-

ry. Moreover, historians have ignored this, although several thousand workers were exported annually to Abadan from Bombay and Karachi. The Anglo-Persian was central in Britain's plans for an assured supply of energy. The British government owned a 51 per cent shareholding in Anglo-Persian, and actively promoted its expansion throughout the world. Britain's oil burning fleet won the war for it at sea in 1914-18, and Britain and the United States' ownership of oil — and Germany and Japan's lack of petroleum resources — was critical in deciding the Allied victory in World War II.

### Poor Conditions

The Anglo-Persian chafed at the requirement that it present returning emigrants before the Protector of Emigrants to be interviewed on their conditions of work. It claimed that "the obligation to appear before the Protector of Emigrants is irksome to labourers as well as to the company." The Protector uncovered gross cases of maltreatment, such as one in which eight men who struck work because of their living conditions were sent to jail by the government of India's Magistrate at Mohammerah. The Magistrate pointed out that these workers were entitled to accommodation under the contract with the company — they were housed along with 51 others in an open shed 60 feet long — providing about a foot of width for each worker. Yet because they absented themselves from work, he sentenced them under section 492 of the Indian Penal Code to imprisonment.

When the Protector raised this and other cases, the Indian government's political officer at Basrah — most of these political agents joined the Anglo-Persian after their retirement — said this "introduces into Persia a wholly novel concept calculated to cause difficulties..." To this AK Sarkar of the foreign and political department was constrained to point out that it was only just and reasonable that these workers "should have a day for rest after working for nine hours daily for six days continuously". If called upon, in the interests of the company, to work on a Sunday, they "should be given some inducement i.e. he should get something more than his usual daily wages."

But he was overruled by another official who claimed that the idea of special rates of pay being given for Sunday labour was "entirely foreign to the mind of the indigenous labourer and might well provoke trouble". There should be freedom to contract, he said, claiming it to be a matter which could quite safely be left to be settled between the employer and the employed. On the other hand, a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council pointed out that the agreement did not seem to be fair: the company could sack a worker giving just one month's notice. Indeed, if the workers proved "incompetent" of which the company was to be the sole judge, he could be instantly sacked. By contrast, if the workers tried to leave the Company's service before the end of his employment, he could be thrown in jail. But ultimately the view that prevailed was that: "The importance to the Company of having its labour supply undisturbed is one of Imperial Military necessity, and the position is practically the same as if the company were actually engaged in operations of war..." So the government of India suspended the enforcement of the Emigration Act in February 1918.

### Act Ignored

The Anglo-Persian took full advantage of this absence of regulation. A petition by seven Indian workmen — four Jews, two Muslims and a Hindu — in August 1918 engaged by Shaw Wallace and Company on behalf of Anglo-Persian complained that when their terms expired they were detained under military law. They were compelled to work without shelter under the watch of an armed sentry. The Chief of General Staff explained that they were detained — under military law — because "they could not be replaced." Yet — as the Protector of Emigrants noted in 1924 — even after the Act was reintroduced, the Company blithely ignored it. The story of Indian labour in West Asia — which contributed so much to global economic growth in this century: and helped win two world wars by its production of cheap petroleum — has yet to be written.

