

‘Drunkenness, disease, and death broods over the portals’¹: Liquor and Regulation of the Health of European Sailors in Nineteenth-century Calcutta

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Introduction

The British sailor’s promiscuous, dipsomaniac image came to be cloaked by a curtain of respectability in the nineteenth century. Known for ‘unrefined language, his flights to violence, his rootlessness and his strong passions for women and drink’, the sailor had been an idiom of social evil.² Towards the late eighteenth century, naval authorities, Christian missionaries, authors, and playwrights started making efforts to rectify the image of sailors, by highlighting them as makers of Britain’s maritime empire. In Victorian and Edwardian Britain, sailors were increasingly portrayed as defenders of the nation and devoted family persons. American sailors were likewise presented sympathetically in the annual report of the American Seamen’s Friend Society in 1852, which stated that more than 70,000 sailors had pledged temperance and nearly 50 Sailors’ Homes were established in port cities.³ The merchant and war navies of several countries at this time supplied premium quality coffee and tea to discourage sailors from drinking liquor. Naval authorities argued that abstinence improved the chance of surviving the ordeals of sea journey.⁴ Contrary to such generous characterisation of sailors stood the British Indian government’s anxiety about the worsening situation of European sailors in Indian port cities. Their efforts to regulate the health and behaviour of sailors drew a fault line between imperial and colonial contexts of governance.

¹ Anonymous, “Sailor Life in Calcutta”, *The Calcutta Review* 40, no. 82 (1864), 465.

² Mary A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 2.

³ *Annual Report of the American Seamen’s Friend Society*, cited in James Haughton, *A Plea for Teetotalism* (London: William Tweedie, 1855), 111.

⁴ Axel Gustafson, *The Foundation of Death: A Study of the Drink-Question* (London: Kegan Paul, 1884), 97.

Alcohol was considered central to the cohort of collective behaviour of the sailors. Drinking was a means to befriend strangers, allay fears of perilous journey, and generate a sense of bonhomie among the crew. The captain exercised authority over his crew through regulating their access to alcohol.⁵ Consumption of liquor by discharged sailors at port cities at the end of a ship's journey was more problematic. British ruling groups in early nineteenth-century India were particularly embarrassed by their failure to adequately discipline drunken sailors.⁶ They were also concerned that local liquor, often found to be adulterated and low quality, was pernicious enough for Europeans to cause racial degeneration. Harald Fisher-Tiné argues that colonial narratives blamed consumption of drugged liquor instead of pure European liquor for causing sailors to commit crime. He observes that the behaviour of these 'white subalterns' was so embarrassing for the colonial government that sailors were envisaged as a 'potential threat' to the government's racial supremacist policy. As reckless behaviour brought European sailors closer to the 'uncivilized natives', the state was alarmed at the potential implosion of their lofty ideals of the civilizational purity of race and class.⁷ Drinking was thus a space of encounter between the colonial state and the port city.

The works of Fischer-Tiné and David Arnold have explored the disreputable section among European settlers in India that the colonial state was unwilling to call attention to.⁸ However, what I identify as a lacuna in existing works is the lack of attention to how detrimental adulteration of liquor and the crimping system in a colonial setting was to the health of white sailors, who were seen to be vulnerable to local influences, exemplified by their exposure to cholera and cheap liquor. Additionally, liquor was uniquely envisaged as a cause of cholera at

⁵ Taylor Gray, "Whispers in a Bottle: The Language of Liquor and the Politics of Prohibition in Nineteenth-century New Zealand", *Law and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2016), 90-114.

⁶ Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 27.

⁷ Harald Fischer-Tiné, "The Drinking Habits of Our Countrymen: European Alcohol Consumption and Colonial Power in British India", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 3 (2012): 383-408.

⁸ David Arnold, "European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 104-127.

a time when aetiologists were uncertain about the exact nature of bacterial contamination leading to the disease. This article argues that sanitary regulation thus inseparably blended with an anti-vice attitude in administrative policies in the colony. It begins with an analysis of the Government of Bengal's attempts to regulate liquor consumption among European sailors. Thereafter it traces the connected history of the fight against adulteration of liquor in the British colonial world, with emphasis on Calcutta. Finally, it traces the adverse social effects of the medical problems of adulteration on the behaviour of sailors in port cities. The article aims to investigate the extent to which the colonial state's measures to protect the health of sailors were informed by imperial encounters in the fields of medical intervention, race relations, environmentalism, and legal order. Specifically, this study of adulteration and quality control of drinks takes into account David Arnold's exhortation of being aware of the links and flows between colonial and metropolitan medicine.⁹ Shula Marks pertinently pointed out the necessity of considering what was precisely colonial, in terms of anxiety and difference, in the overlap between the colony and the metropole.¹⁰ In this connection, it examines the agency of colonial power in controlling the discourses of medicine, emphasising the extent to which medicine in the colonial situation complimented and was separate from the metropolitan context.

The prevention of mortality and regulation of profligacy among European sailors

An American visitor to Calcutta, Colesworthy Grant, wrote in 1850 that white sailors brought immense disrepute to the city. The sailors' favourite haunt was the Flag Street in Lalbazar, which was full of taverns maintained by Indians, and Europeans from Italy, Spain and Portugal. They would 'disappear for days in the nests and fastness of riot and profligacy which are

⁹ David Arnold, *Colonising the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Shula Marks, "What Is Colonial about Colonial Medicine? And What has Happened to Imperialism and Health?", *Social History of Medicine* 10, no. 2 (1997): 205-219.

numerous in that vicinity'.¹¹ Captains of ships would often visit the gambling and drinking dens, sometimes accompanied by police constables, to retrieve sailors in time for the outward journey. The temperance movement in England inspired voluntary organisations in India, especially Christian associations, to discourage sailors from 'temptations' as part of a transnational effort. As stories of drunken stupor of European and American sailors in Indian port cities circulated internationally, the colonial state became active in disciplining them. The police were always on the lookout for 'houses of ill-repute' that sponged off visiting sailors. They monitored the sale and consumption of liquor, particularly adulterated liquor, in an attempt to restrain and protect the health of European sailors since they did not expect abstinence from the latter. According to an observer writing in the 1850s,

There is a great outcry in Calcutta, and for once a reasonable one, against the grog shops, and the danger of them to the British soldiers and sailors. The spirit is bad, and very cheap indeed, and they have indulged terribly in it. Some got drunk that their medals were robbed from them, and few have died of drink... A good many days ago, the Lieutenant- Governor (of Bengal) was told to enforce the act withdrawing licenses from those shops where people came out drunk, but now a better thing is being done by establishing a Government canteen on the Maidan in tents, where good spirits and tea and coffee and beer can be had, and skittles and games, and newspapers and books for amusement.¹²

Dr Hugh Macpherson, Inspector General of Army Hospitals, counted 716 deaths from cholera among the European Protestant population in his report on mortality in Calcutta between 1856 and 1860. As much as 76 per cent of cholera victims were the floating population, mainly

¹¹ Colesworthy Grant, cited in T.R. Barrett, *Calcutta: Strange Memoirs – Foreign Perceptions* (Calcutta: Deep Prakashan, 2004), 384.

¹² "Grog Shops", *Calcutta through British Eyes 1690-1900*, edited by Laura Sykes (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47-48.

sailors.¹³ Macpherson remarked that ship captains and crews had identified certain anchor sites along the Hooghly river as more perilous than others. Colvin's Ghat, close to the mouth of a long sewer, was particularly notorious, as were Thompson's Ghat, Cooly Bazar, Fort Point and Armenian Ghat. He concluded that though none of these sites were perennial breeding grounds of diseases, disembarking sailors were in danger of catching cholera.¹⁴ A report in the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* in 1865 mentioned hospital admittance of 11 cholera patients from a house in Bow Bazar within a few weeks. It criticised the Calcutta Municipal Corporation as a body of 'wrong-headed people who muddle each other and do no earthly good for public'.¹⁵ The lack of progress in combating cholera is evident from a report in *Lancet* in 1887 which blamed the high mortality among European sailors, around 11.1 per 1,000 persons, on 'breathing [the city's] foul air, and partaking of drinks diluted not always with hydrant water'.¹⁶ It noted that the Jack Tar was expected to adapt to this unparalleled atrocious environment, portraying them as helpless victims of circumstances unique to the colony.

The Government of India was arguably more concerned with the health of European soldiers than sailors. The first *Annual Report of the Sanitary Commission for Bengal, 1864-65*, contained 55 pages on the need for improving the diet and barrack accommodation of troops, and the necessity of new hospitals for them, compared to three pages on sailors. A correspondent to the *Friend of India* wrote that sailors were neglected in comparison with soldiers, whose achievements were celebrated vigorously, especially after 1857, in government blue books, newspapers and pamphlets. Death and disease among the army were given more importance. Questioning the colonial government's policy, he asked,

¹³ Hugh M. Macpherson, *On the Mortality of Calcutta during the Twenty Years ending with 1860* (Calcutta: s.n., 1861).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 19 (29 April 1865), 507.

¹⁶ *Lancet*, 5 November 1887, 931-932.

What does India do for the sailors who carry to and fro the wealth which enriches her? Nothing that can be appreciated. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras are all bad alike and all complain equally...choleraic drains, a life-destroying sun, drugged brandy, brothels exceeding in beastliness the pictures of juvenal, robbery under the name of discount and charge on bills and notes.¹⁷

It was the combined effort of actors in Britain and India that finally made the colonial state ponder the need for greater medical attention to improve sailors' daily life. An address by Dr Norman Chevers, Principal of Calcutta Medical College, to seamen at the Floating library, Calcutta, on 5 January 1864, provided the initial impetus for the state to act. Lamenting the state of sailors, who were supposed to be healthy and convivial, Chevers wrote in the introduction to his treatise, 'The British Seamen ought to be – and, when placed under favourable circumstances, is, – one of the healthiest of mankind'.¹⁸ While the state was aware of the high mortality rate among European sailors, it was only after the publication of Chevers' essay that they began taking measures to improve the living conditions of seafarers in Calcutta. They started maintaining registers for sailors and enacted new sanitary regulations on the basis of accumulated data. As part of its welfare programme, the Sanitary Commission recommended providing sailors with comfortable accommodation and amusement.¹⁹ Sanitation and hygiene in the old Sailors' Home, constructed in 1838 in Bow Bazar, had by then deteriorated.

A second impetus was the cyclone on 5 October 1864 that destroyed many ships at the port of Calcutta, leaving 547 European sailors without occupation. As 458 discharged sailors were already on shore, the port authorities now had 1005 sailors to rehabilitate. Destitute, sick, and

¹⁷ Anonymous, "The English Sailors in India", *The Friend of India*, April 1863.

¹⁸ Norman Chevers, *On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen, Especially Those Frequenting Calcutta and Other Indian Ports* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1864).

¹⁹ "Sailor Life in Calcutta", 466.

left to despair, many of them landed in prisons and hospitals. The authorities provided for 563 sailors by 23 January 1865 – sending 95 and 68 sailors home at the expense of the Board of Trade and the Relief Fund respectively, shipping 187 sailors on nominal wages, recruiting 30 sailors to the Royal Navy in Bombay, and employing 183 sailors on full wages in maritime or other activities.²⁰ The Lt Governor of Bengal asked the Sanitary Commission to investigate the state of sailors and produce a report. In May 1866, Major G.B. Malleon responded with a report, titled “The State of Sailors in Calcutta”, raising concerns about the living conditions, health, and behaviour of sailors. He quoted the Superintendent of the Reserve Force of Police admitting that Calcutta port was overpopulated with sailors.²¹ A report from Captain Alexander Caw, Shipping Master, showed that between 1 May 1864 and 30 April 1865, 629 ships with a total of approximately 17,298 sailors visited the port of Calcutta. 3,655 sailors were discharged during this period; 129 deserted, 214 were sent to prison and 232 to hospital, 231 died, and the rest were left without employment.²²

Malleon writes that a letter to the Board of Trade on 30 June 1865 expressed concern about the Calcutta port turning into ‘a sort of a depot’ for seamen. Apart from other ports of British India such as Bombay and Rangoon, sailors arrived from Shanghai, Sydney, Melbourne, Mauritius, as well as from English towns such as Shields and Tyne.²³ This influx thwarted the city port’s ability to employ and accommodate sailors. The port authorities duly felt the inconvenience caused by unemployed and destitute sailors. They stipulated in the 206th section of the Merchant Shipping Act that the Shipping Master should be contacted before discharging any inbound sailor. The captain could be prosecuted for mistreatment of employees if found to have infringed this rule. Captain Caw stressed the necessity for the Board of Directors to

²⁰ *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency for 1864-65* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1966), 102.

²¹ G.B. Malleon, “The State of Sailors in Calcutta”, *BL Marine Proceedings*, May, 1866, From J. M. Cunningham, officiating Sanitation Commissioner for Bengal, to the secretary to the government of Bengal, 9.

²² *Ibid*, 4.

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

prevent ships arriving from colonial ports such as Melbourne and Sydney, or ports in England, from discharging sailors in Calcutta unless the latter did not have a clause about return passage to their homeland. He averred that the port was not suitable to support too many sailors. In a letter to the Master Attendant, J.G. Reddie, in July 1865, he wrote that the number of jobless seamen on 12 July 1865 was 692, whereas the maximum the port could sustain was 500.²⁴

The overpopulation of seamen further compounded the health and legal problems associated with sailors. Disease, suffering and mortality among sailors were principally associated with poor eating habits, stale and contaminated air in tiny ship cabins, exposure to various unhealthy climatic conditions,²⁵ and above all drunkenness and visit to local prostitutes.²⁶ Chevers stated that the Sailors' Home was 'surrounded with drinking shops of vilest description' and situated in the 'centre of about the worst atmosphere discoverable in this unsavoury city'.²⁷ He suggested construction of a larger building in a 'healthier' and 'reputable' part of the city. Montague Massey wrote that the Sailors' Home in the 1860s was a 'crying scandal', situated in an area abounding with 'native grogshops in which [shopkeepers] sold to the sailors most villainous, poisonous decoctions under various designations', and 'boarding houses run by a thieving set of low-caste American crimps'.²⁸ Moreover, Lalbazar, the hub of watering holes and brothels, did not have a working sewage system. The drains were mostly open, and full of black putrid slime accumulated over years. The marketplaces were generally disdained for their 'disgusting' appearance.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid, 6.

²⁵ For an understanding of European attitudes towards India's climatic conditions and its influence on colonial expansion- impact of tropical climate on the health of Europeans living in India, see Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India 1600–1850* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁶ Chevers, "On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen", 37.

²⁷ Ibid, 46.

²⁸ Montague Massey, *Recollections of Calcutta for over Half a Century* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spinck, 1917), 89.

²⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India", *South Asia* 14, no. 1 (1991): 15-31.

Newspapers such as the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* and *Friend of India* criticised the irregularity of sanitary supervision and failure to enforce sale of hygienic food in the area. However, no threat of fatal disease deterred sailors to spend time there, mainly for want of better options. Malleson wrote that the conditions of the neighbourhood, suitable for rapid circulation of epidemics, demanded constant care and vigilance by both the police and the municipality.³⁰ In a letter, dated 25 February 1864, the Secretary of Sailors' Home requested H.C. James, private secretary to the Lt Governor of Bengal, a new establishment in a better locality. He also expressed the need for a recreation ground for seamen, an area enclosed with a bamboo fence, resembling a cricket ground.³¹ In response, the government enclosed a part of the *maidan* (a vast field between the fort and the esplanade) for sailors to play cricket.³²

The existing Sailors' Home was later sold and a new house built at 13 Strand Road with the money, under Lord Lawrence's 'special care'.³³ This new home was advantageously situated in a better locality but accommodated fewer sailors compared to the 200 in the former building. Addition of a floor depended on the availability of funds. The location of fevers and other social evils thus often determined urban restructuring. Chevers recommended better drainage along Flag Street as a must for improving sanitation to protect sailors from diseases such as cholera and dysentery.³⁴ He further advised that at the start of each cholera season (which usually was July to early October), the captain of every vessel should be given a set of regulations for the prevention and cure of this dangerous epidemic.³⁵ The authorities also thought about accommodating homeless sailors in other boarding houses, which were now

³⁰ Malleson, "The State of the Sailors in Calcutta".

³¹ Letter from S.H. Robinson, Secretary of Sailor's Home, to Lt Colonel H.C. James, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, 25 February 1864, 5, Marine Department.

³² Letter from F.R. Cockerell, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to S.H. Robinson, Secretary of Sailor's Home, no. 1146, 5 March 1864, 5, Marine Department.

³³ Walter K. Firminger, ed., *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spinck, 1906), 163.

³⁴ Chevers, "On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen", 51.

³⁵ Malleson, "State of Sailors in Calcutta", 3.

carefully inspected for cleanliness to ensure proper living standards. Landlords were warned about revocation of license unless they fixed problems reported by residents.³⁶ However, the infamous liquor addiction of sailors proved to be a greater concern for the colonial state, particularly as the quality of liquor was below standard and fatal in some cases.

Drunkenness and the abuses of adulterated liquor

As the number of deaths from cholera increased among European sailors, the quality of drinking water came under scrutiny.³⁷ Intake of unfiltered river water in the absence of clean water was thought to be responsible for this high mortality rate.³⁸ However, European doctors thought that such diseases had causes other than insanitary living conditions or poor quality of drinking water. Something more alarming must have resulted in cholera and also brought up moral and social degradation of sailors. Although cholera was not directly connected with the cyclone of 1864, it was suggested that the natural calamity aggravated the disease.³⁹ Certain localities, particularly around the port, were believed to have turned into hotbeds of cholera, endangering sailors. The Medical College Hospital, situated near Flag Street in the centre of the city, admitted more than twice as many sailors as the General Hospital. Chevers estimated that as many as ten per cent of the sailors entering the Calcutta port died in the city every year.⁴⁰ Many of the cholera victims supposedly succumbed to adulterated liquor, though the legitimacy of counting alcohol as a cause of cholera was controversial.

It can be argued that the colonial state's concern about adulteration was influenced by the British attitude towards the problem in the nineteenth century. The chemist Fredrick Accum discussed in 1820 how some dealers adulterated food and drink items with harmful

³⁶ Ibid, 9-10.

³⁷ Macpherson, *On the Mortality of Calcutta*.

³⁸ Chevers, "On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen", 41.

³⁹ J.E. Gastrell and H.F. Blandford, *Report on the Calcutta Cyclone of the 5th of October, 1864*, 126.

⁴⁰ Chevers, "On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen".

substances.⁴¹ ‘There is death in the pot’, he wrote as a preamble to the detailed exploration into how the poisonous extract of *cocculus indicus* (popularly known as the black extract) was mixed with malt liquors to increase the level of intoxication at an economised production cost. Sometimes a substance called multum that comprised of genetian root, liquorice juice and black extract was used.⁴² More dangerous was the practice of adulterating wine with lead to stop the process of acescence of wine, and maintain the transparency of white wine when it became turbid. Even a small amount of lead acted as slow poison, prompting Accum to castigate the practitioners of adulteration as fraud as well as murderers.⁴³ The book failed to generate enough interest as he would have wished, and it was not until 1851 that Thomas Wakley, surgeon and editor of the medical weekly, *The Lancet*, and his colleagues started a campaign to promulgate the dangers of adulteration. They observed under a microscope foodstuff bought from different markets. This was followed by the establishment of the Analytical Sanitary Commission under the supervision of Arthur Hill Hassall and Dr H. Letheby. Hassall examined about 25,000 food and drink samples between January 1851 and December 1854, the report of which was published in *Lancet* and attracted the interest of newspapers. He ensured publishing as many instances of death, poisoning, paralysis or any illness caused by intake of adulterated drinks as possible.⁴⁴

A Select Committee was established in 1855 to enquire adulteration of food and drink, which reported the next year that adulteration must be stopped for the protection of public health, revenue, the interest of honest merchants, consumers and public morality, especially the last one as to prevent depreciation of ‘the high commercial character of this country... both at home

⁴¹ Fredrick Accum, *A Treatise on Adulteration of Food and Culinary Poisons, Exhibiting The Fraudulent Sophistications of Bread, Beer, Wine, spirituous Liquor, Tea, Coffee... And Methods of Detecting Them* (London: Longman, 1820).

⁴² *Ibid*, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 102-103.

⁴⁴ Sandra Morton, “A Little of What You Fancy Does You... Harm!! (with Apologies to Marie Lloyd)”, in *Criminal Conversations: Victorian Crimes, Social Panic, and Moral Outrage*, edited by Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson (Ohio: The Ohio State University, 2005), 165-168.

and in the eyes foreign countries...'⁴⁵ Many producers and retailers justified adulteration on the basis that was harmless and was productive to keep the cost low for its consumers. The problem soon became endemic to British society.⁴⁶ The Adulteration of Foods Act 1860 was amended in 1872, incorporating Hassall's proposition about the appointment of a public analyst. The Society of Public Analysts was founded in 1874, and the Sale of Food and Drugs Act 1875 stipulated manufacturers to print a guarantee of purity on wrappers and packets along with the certificates of public analysts.⁴⁷ This measure was not adopted in British India until the twentieth century as the technology of ascertaining dilution levels was not available across the territory. The colonial state's reluctance to meddle too much into local institutions that did not directly engage or confront them could also be a reason. A pattern emerged in major administrative centres such as Calcutta, Bombay and Madras of investigating allegations of adulteration and implementing crackdown on public houses as an essential aspect of sailor welfare. If the concern for public health prompted the government to control locally produced liquor, the loss of revenue was another compelling reason for their objection. The East India Company monopolised the liquor trade in 1773 and subsequently generated huge revenue from the steep excise tax on alcohol. This article will exclusively consider the medical aspect of the state's intervention in liquor trade.

Kirwan Joyce of the Bombay Police wrote that the high number of liquor shops besmirched places such as Dabee Tank and Duncan Road in Bombay. The shops were not too close to one another as the law forbade clustering of liquor shops in specific neighbourhoods. The distance between the shops made it difficult for the police to raid. Many of these shops were known to have employed discharged European soldiers as crimps or 'catchpoles' at no wages. These

⁴⁵ Arthur Hill Hassall, *Adulterations Detected or Plain Instructions for the Discovery of Frauds in Food and Medicine* 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 37-39.

⁴⁶ Chris Otter, "The Vital City: Public Analysis, Dairies and Slaughterhouses in Nineteenth-century Britain", *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 4 (2006), 520.

⁴⁷ Morton, "A Little of What You Fancy Does You... Harm!!", 170-171.

people earned their livelihood from the ‘plunder of the unfortunate wretches’ such as sailors. The liquor shops also employed abandoned women as prostitutes, under the cover of domestic servitude. These women went to the piers and lured sailors into their establishments, called ‘Tereerams’, for which they received a remuneration.⁴⁸ These establishments were infamous for using prostitutes to lure sailors into their premises, have them drugged with adulterated liquor, and loot their belongings.

Joyce argued that adulteration and not simply consumption of liquor was responsible for numerous deaths. Many licenced shops sold concoctions exclusively for sailors, named ‘Sailor Jack’ or ‘Tom’s Brandy’, prepared from strong arrack mixed with the ‘poisonous juice’ of Datura, the juices of tobacco and chillies, and opium. The beer on sale, priced at 50 paisa per bottle, was a mixture of beer, water, a decoction of vinegar, soap nuts, sugar and soda. The wine, which cost a rupee a bottle, was a combination of vinegar, sugar, Parsee Brandy, and a decoction of log-wood.⁴⁹ The abundance of liquor shops where such products were sold compounded the problem. Among the 422 liquor shops were three hotels, 13 taverns, 172 retail shops, and 234 toddy shops. The Flag Street area in Calcutta was likewise infamous as an enclave where sailors were served adulterated liquor and robbed presumably when they lost consciousness.

The debates and correspondences about adulterated liquor engendered a discourse of the corrupting influence of the Orient on western people. Some colonial officials reported a conspiracy by the ‘deceitful’, ‘cruel’, and ‘dangerous’ natives of getting innocent white sailors drunk and stealing their possession. This narrative recast white sailors as victims of colonial subjects. Their crimes, including theft and murder, were often attributed not to lack of morality

⁴⁸ Michael Kirwan Joyce, *An Exposure of the Haunts of Infamy and Dens of Vice in Bombay* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Press, 1854), 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

but to the intake of pernicious Indian narcotics mixed in drinks. Some reports exonerated sailors, saying that these semi-educated men had little else to escape the hard physical labour and mental exhaustion of maritime careers than indulging in liquor. A.L. Mitchell, Seamen's Chaplain, gives a vivid description of how crimps operated in Indian port cities in his narration of stories of the destitution of white sailors. The 'crimping system' was practiced widely on board ships, Flag street, and in the vicinity of the shipping office. Crimps formed gangs and called themselves 'runners'. He accused them of being 'harpies', enticing sailors to consume drugged liquor. The sources of Chaplain Mitchell's information were convalescing sailors, who told him stories of being helpless, 'unfortunate victims', and 'dupes of conspiracy' of the crimps.⁵⁰ These despondent sailors wandered around the city, often ending up in prisons.

The concern over the quality of liquor sold at local grog shops grew as reports about 'treacherous' Indians tricking 'innocent' European sailors into drinking 'poisonous' liquor increased. The colonial state now had to contend with sailors succumbing to adulterated liquor in addition to the existing problem of neglect of duty and notorious behaviour.⁵¹ The concern over purity of alcohol led the government to investigate the quality of liquor sold in local markets. Liquor in some shops was found to have traces of several strong narcotic drugs such as *datura*, *cocculus indicus*, *gunjah*. It was made 'fiery hot' with red pepper and other 'tongue-rasping' and 'bowel-scorching abominations'.⁵² Investigations into the sale of adulterated liquor to poor Europeans, especially sailors and soldiers, in shops (which were described as 'dens of pestilence') on Lalbazar, Bow Bazaar, Rada Bazaar and College Street revealed that many shopkeepers sold 'native' liquors, or what was described by Chevers and others as 'bazaar sharab' (such as *Mudut* and *Doasta*), disguised in English bottles with labels such as

⁵⁰ Letter from Seamen's Chaplain, A.L. Mitchell, to Major Malleson, "The State of the Sailors in Calcutta", xiii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Chevers, "On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen", 41.

‘Old Tom’ and ‘Exshaw’s Brandy’.⁵³ In fact, better quality liquors such as ‘Exshaw’s first class Brandy’ were sold to Europeans at a price higher than the actual market rate. In 1857-58, an enquiry into the quality of bazar liquor in Calcutta proved by actual chemical analysis that the liquor sold in bazar was not drugged but diluted; and that the excessive drunkenness and its result was due to the quantity than the quality of the liquor.

According to Chevers, unadulterated liquor was so difficult to obtain that a ‘sober man’ (ostensibly a British sailor) could hardly ever drink a pint of proper beer.⁵⁴ In many cases sailors were found to suffer from cholera after intake of poisonous liquor purchased from local grog shops. Mortality of incoming sailors was higher compared to the rest of the European population suffering from cholera due to their overindulgence in poisonous liquor.⁵⁵ Chevers argued that instances of death could be reduced to nearly two-third of the present number if alcohol consumption could be controlled. He speculated that the sale of rum would considerably increase were the amount of duty on rum and *doasta* to be evened. All *doasta* in Calcutta was to be distilled under strict surveillance. Low quality, ‘poisonous’ liquor continued to be sold unabated despite such issues being made public. Dr Tonnerre, the municipal health officer, stated that a few years ago, Magistrate Macleod Wylie had reduced the sale of ‘noxious liquor’ by ordering raids on public houses that sold liquor and withdrawing licences from those found guilty of selling poisonous liquor. He commented that a group of men often stalked sailors, enticed them into their haunts in which they sold liquor of the ‘vilest description’, and robbed them as they lost consciousness from the drugged liquor.⁵⁶ Disease and destitution were thus intermingled in medical treatises.

⁵³ Ibid, 65.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 37.

⁵⁵ Chevers, *A Commentary on the Diseases of India* (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1886).

⁵⁶ Malleson, “The State of the Sailors in Calcutta”, 2.

Various people and organisations supported the campaign against adulterated liquor. *The Indian Year Book for 1862* applauded the contribution of the newspaper *The Friend of India*, stating that it had done ‘good service by directing attention to the alarming increase in the consumption of spirits’. It quoted the following from the newspaper ‘As if it were not tough that drunkenness should be the national crime of the English at home, and should only too unmistakably characterise her sailors and lower classes abroad, it would seem as though the Government of India were determined to make their heathen subjects and their own soldiers as bad as the people of the mother country...’.⁵⁷ Since European sailors were hard to deter from drinking, alternative steps were taken to ensure ‘none but pure alcohol would be sold’. Additionally, the civic authorities tried to reduce the number of shops which sold the cheapest possible liquor. The actions were justified by assertions such as ‘sober men’ should be provided the opportunity to buy ‘well-made coffee’, ‘good soda water’, ‘ginger-beer’ and ‘lemonade’ at proper rates.⁵⁸ In a letter dated 13 June 1864, Chevers recommended appointing a competent inspector for every ship arriving at the port and installing of proper taps for selling good quality spirits, wine, beer and other drinks to sailors.

The Borradaile, Schiller, and Co., a major partner in the Port Canning Land Investment, Reclamation, and Dock Company, suggested prohibition and heavy penalties for sellers of ‘that most intoxicating drink, the Indian Rum and Doasta’. They supported reduction of duty on European drinks to make its price competitive in the local market. The Municipality adopted Dr Tonnerre’s suggestion of registering all seamen on arrival at Calcutta port and maintaining a list of the number and cause of casualties as narrated by the captain of the vessel.⁵⁹ The government closely monitored the Inquiries made by Chevers and other officers on the matter of ‘unwholesome food and drink’. Chevers’ report drew enough attention and subsequently for

⁵⁷ John Murdock ed., *India Year – Book for 1862* (Madras: Graves, Cookson, 1862), 117.

⁵⁸ Chevers, “On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen”, 51.

⁵⁹ Malleson, “The State of the Sailors in Calcutta”, 3.

the first time appropriate measures were taken. Following its publication in 1864, a special committee was appointed to assist health officers to systematically inspect food and drink sold in the public markets, and confiscate ‘unwholesome articles’.⁶⁰

Crime and crimps in the sailor dens in Calcutta

Consumption of intoxicants drugged with certain narcotics reportedly caused sailors to commit crime. The police frequently received complaints about their disorderly behaviour. It was commonly believed that respite from long and difficult sea voyages caused instances of insubordination and drunken misdeeds. The reasons for keeping sailors under watch included drunkenness, assault, theft, refusal to work, absence without leave, inability to pay fine for housebreaking, stealing of property, suspicious loitering, rioting and indecency.⁶¹ Additionally, the residential neighbourhood proved to increase their contact with local street women and prostitutes. In the section on the dangers in the bazaars of Calcutta, Chevers mentions sailors frequenting ‘miserable women’, a euphemism for prostitutes. He also suggested construction of lock hospitals for women in Calcutta which ought to have been licensed and strictly inspected.⁶²

It is interesting to note that none of the problems mentioned in the official documents – sanitary issues, the location of the Sailor’s Home, the consumption of poisonous liquor, the crimping system or sailors committing crimes – was specific to Calcutta, and occurred in Britain too. The parasitic ‘crimps’ were present at every corner of the sailors’ quarters in London – boarding houses, tap-rooms of the public houses, long rooms of the gin-palaces and brothels – and were said to have ruined many maritime careers. An anonymous writer to the *Sailors’ Magazine* blamed sailors for landing themselves in traps they were well-aware of, and ship-

⁶⁰ Chevers, “On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen”, 63.

⁶¹ “Sailor Life in Calcutta”, 462-463.

⁶² Chevers, “On the Preservation of the Health of Seamen”, 65.

owners and captains for insensitively driving sailors towards destitution. The propensity to relax in the port city after too much hard work and lack of recreation aboard vessels led to drinking binges. An inebriated sailor could be easily persuaded into a ‘criminal’ and ‘libertine’ life. The author mentions ‘foes’ drugging and poisoning their drinks, prolonged consumption of which ‘enslaved’ the sailor to the ‘virile’ drink. The crimps would disappear with his belongings – clothes, money, health and strength – by the time the sailor recovered from his drug-induced reverie. The sailor would be unable to afford meals and accommodation afterwards, having lost everything, with little knowledge of the person responsible for this turnout, and be left with no choice but to depend on the same or another crimp for bailout.

Crimps now worked as an employment agent, moving around with placards reading ‘able seamen wanted’. They charged sailors an exorbitant amount of money in credit for accommodation and clothes which was to be returned from the wage received from the sailor’s next job. Unscrupulous ship-owners hired these sailors at lower wages, with a commission going to crimps for mediating. They entertained crimps because of their ability to provide cheap labour at short notice. A ‘drugged’, ‘stupefied’, distressed sailor was in no position to bargain a proper wage.⁶³ The trap was so well coordinated that a ship captain wrote to the *Sailors’ Magazine*, ‘and thus is the most noble and most generous of Britain’s sons duped, before he sets his foot ashore...’⁶⁴ This is indeed a telling commentary about the transformation of ‘low and licentious’ sailors into the ‘most noble and most generous’ in maritime accounts.

Consistent with the change of the Jack Tar’s image in Britain, some of the Europeans in Calcutta sought to gloss over their alleged crimes as actions forced by circumstances. One of them criticised labelling the entire class as a ‘drunken, reckless, mutinous lot’.⁶⁵ It is hard to

⁶³ “The Crimping System in London”, *Sailors’ Magazine* 17, no. 5 (January 1845), 139-141.

⁶⁴ “The Crimping System- No.1”, *Sailors’ Magazine* 17, no. 2 (October 1844), 116-119.

⁶⁵ “Sailor Life in Calcutta”, 453.

determine the actual number of ‘criminal’ sailors as police records are sparse, and numbers were often inflated owing to the notoriety of sailors. When pressed to reveal how many of these sailors were from the ship attended by the speaker, all of them admitted that the numbers were exaggerated. Repeated complaints about behaviour had maligned the community of sailors, but also initiated investigations to understand and redress their problems.⁶⁶ Records of court hearings across several decades in the nineteenth century indicate that many of the crimes committed by sailors were perpetrated under influence of adulterated, poisonous liquor sold in the markets. There were also complaints that the government had not done enough to stop such illegal activities. The juries regularly pleaded to the court to prohibit this ‘evil’ on the rise in the streets and markets of Calcutta. Despite the expectation and power invested in them, the first Sanitary Commission accomplished less than was anticipated.⁶⁷

Malleson wrote in his report that a lock-up register contained 365 instances of drunkenness and confinement of sailors, and 186 were accused among those living ashore – nearly three per cent of the off-duty sailors. Many among them were charged with assault. However, only 35 of them were committed to the Sailor House for corrective measures. Many people argued that sailors could hardly avert the temptations offered in Flag Street, the Sailor’s Home, or any boarding house in disreputable neighbourhoods. They needed some amusement to keep themselves busy. Chaplain Mitchell was one of the proponents of this view. He admitted that it was difficult to stop sailors from going to public houses and brothels, but efforts should be made to prevent them from doing so. An institute was needed for sailors to socialise, entertain themselves with a large bowling alley, chess, and draughts, and drink tea, coffee, ‘good’ soda-water, ginger beer and lemonade at proper rate.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid, 462-464.

⁶⁷ *The Friend of India*, 2 June 1864.

⁶⁸ Seamen’s Chaplain, A.L. Mitchell in response to G.B. Malleson, 1865, x-xi. To show his concern for the Seamen’s Institute, he wrote about his efforts to collect books for the library and secure three grants of books from societies in England, xiii.

Conclusion

This article examined the intertwining of medical and sanitary administration with social and moral concerns about seamen visiting Calcutta. It discussed the propensity for drunkenness among sailors as manifested in misdeeds committed by and against them. The efforts to alleviate cholera and adulteration of liquor provide important insights into the ambivalence of early colonial administration. While policies were devised in response to the threat of Indian society to white sailors, the vulnerability of the latter, which was to be concealed and rectified at all costs, stood out in the discourse of the making of an imperial British identity. Therefore it identifies the transfer of medical knowledge, and its translation into public policy, between Britain and India as a salient feature of imperial formation. Medical intervention in this instance acted as an instrument of saving the empire from itself.

Despite similarities in the history of health in metropolitan and colonial port, commentaries assumed different tones while discussing the latter. European sailors became innocent, sober white men, threatened by the unknown, challenging environment in India. Apart from the medical alarms set off by Calcutta's unhygienic conditions, the 'natives' were held responsible for many of the problems experienced by sailors. The distinction between crimps in British and Indian port cities is particularly interesting even though they were mainly Europeans and Americans. The threats they posed to sailors were not very different, but crimps in the Indian port cities were criticised in stronger language. They were portrayed as conspirators against European sailors who tricked 'innocent' men into consuming low quality liquor, sold often in bottles bearing labels of English brands that caught them unawares. Thus, despite the similarity of operation among crimps across continents, racial connotations coloured the British commentaries on Indian crimps. This article has thus highlighted the bias in the accounts of British administrators and civilians. It has also explored the prevalent living conditions of sailors and the government's concern, reflecting the changing image of sailors.

