

Jugglers and the Colonial Encounter: The Experience of Indian Show People in Nineteenth-Century Australia

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Abstract: This paper will contrast the experiences of two groups of Indian show people who performed in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The early entertainment circuits that Indians participated in were zones of contestation reflecting the complex relationship between performers and the local societies that variously accommodated or resisted their presence. These subaltern figures, who were marginalized in their own societies, endured racial prejudice and exploitation, but were not powerless. The case of Mahomet Cassim and his brother Mahomet Abdallah, two Indian jugglers who were subsequently arrested and found guilty of the murder of an Indian hawker, received considerable support from libertarians who believed the men were not given a fair trial and should be pardoned. In 1889, a troupe of jugglers, dancers and “human freaks” were recruited in India and displayed in Adelaide and Melbourne. The troupe’s mistreatment and exploitation was dismissed by the press and public, until the troupe staged what was described as a “mutiny.” Melbourne’s local Indian community rallied to their defence and the Victorian Government was forced to repatriate the troupe. The case would eventually lead to a review of laws covering the emigration of “spectacular performers” from India.

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Early in 1863, a young stockman searching for lost cattle at Sawpit Gully in southern New South Wales found a coat hanging from the branch of a tree. In its pockets were a piece of chalk, a torn playbill, various papers, a saddle strap and two empty gold bags. The following day, he returned to the scene with a friend and after a brief search they found human remains including a skull, some bones, a shirt with a piece of human rib stuck to it, a hat, a spur and a pair of boots. They immediately notified the police at Queanbeyan, the nearest town.

It soon became clear that the remains were of a person who had been murdered. There were stab wounds to the skull, cuts to the shirt and bloodstains. Papers found at the scene belonged to an Indian hawker named Madhoul. There was also a playbill describing the program of two Indian jugglers, Mahomet Cassim and Mahomet Abdallah, who had been performing in the area in November 1861. The playbill described Cassim as an expert swordsman whose aim was so accurate he could sever a piece of string placed on Abdallah’s hand or a piece of steel resting on his breast without inflicting the slightest wound. He could also balance a sword on the point of a needle and break a stone on a man’s head with a tomahawk. Another of his feats was a decapitation trick (“Parliamentary Papers: The Case of Mahomet Cassim” 2).

Coincidentally the jugglers were performing in Queanbeyan with Burton’s Circus at the time the body was discovered. On 15 February 1863, the two men were arrested and on the following day charged with murder. At their trial, several witnesses testified they had seen the three men together near Sawpit Gully before Madhoul disappeared and positively identified the clothes found at the scene as belonging to the victim. It also emerged that

Cassim and Abdallah had hired Madhoul as their manager. An expert witness told the court that the wounds on the skull were consistent with those inflicted by an Indian broadsword, similar to that used by Cassim in his shows and seen in his possession around the time Madhoul disappeared. The court also heard that shortly after the alleged murder took place, Cassim and Abdallah travelled to Sydney and enquired about booking a passage to India (“Murder at Sawpit Gully” 2).

Through an interpreter Cassim told the court that Madhoul had stolen more than £100 they had entrusted with him to send back to India. But he denied murdering him, saying he had absconded with their cash. Cassim also denied bragging that he would decapitate the person who had stolen their money if he ever found him. It took an all-white jury less than three hours to find both men guilty of murder. Justice Wise of the Goulburn District court, though known for his interest in the welfare of the working class and his philanthropy (see “Sydney Summary” 4), showed no sympathy for the men. Declaring that the evidence, though circumstantial, was overwhelming, he sentenced both to be hanged (“The Sawpit Gully Murder” 4).

The sentencing of the jugglers, however, was not the end of the story. The Sawpit Gully Murder Case, as it became known, would create legal history and the plight of the Cassim and Abdallah would be taken up by the liberal press and in Parliament. To begin with, the body was never positively identified. According to one expert, the skull found at the crime scene showed a state of decomposition consistent with it being there for decades, not the fifteen months that had elapsed between the alleged murder and the finding of the remains. The hair attached to the skull was fine with a reddish tinge and unlikely to be that of an Indian. Finally, there was a statement from a man named Ramsay, who was in Goulburn jail for forgery and had befriended the Cassim and Abdallah after their conviction. In a letter to the Justice Wise, Ramsay questioned why a coat belonging to the victim and containing incriminating evidence had been left where it could be easily found. He also claimed that a shepherd and a one-armed soldier had left the district around the same time Madhoul disappeared and deposited a large sum of money with a local farmer. Ramsay also questioned how the papers found on the body were in such good condition after fifteen months in the open. The numerous cuts on the remains, he pointed out, showed that the assassin had indulged in a wild and brutal orgy of slashing, whereas Cassim, an expert swordsman, would have decapitated the victim with one clean blow (“Murder of the Indian Juggler” 5).

Ramsay’s testimony, however, failed to sway the authorities. Nor did Cassim’s eloquently written plea to the Governor of New South Wales declaring his innocence. His gruesome hanging took place at Goulburn on 27 May 1863. A witness described how the Indian did not die instantly when the trapdoor opened. His body continued to writhe for at least four minutes—which one report attributed to the fact that he was an acrobat and therefore physically very strong (“Execution of Mahomet Cassim”, *The Golden Age* 2). His younger brother had earlier had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment.

The story of Cassim and Abdallah reveals the contested, variable, and at times ambivalent interactions that characterized lives of show people who came to Australia from India. That their treatment and the conduct of their trial would lead to protests in the press and NSW parliament, runs counter to the standard narrative of colonial encounters at this time. The same was not the case with that of another group of Indian jugglers and entertainers who arrived in Australia in 1889 and found little if any sympathy for their plight when their employer abused them and virtually abandoned them on the streets of Melbourne. Lee Siegel,

who studied groups of itinerant magicians in India in the 1980s, found the majority were Muslims who had converted from Hinduism “to get rid of their low caste status” (33) only to find themselves relegated to the caste of Malet within an Islamic social hierarchy. Documentary evidence suggests majority of Indian show people (magicians, acrobats, dancers) who were recruited to perform in Australia and in Europe were Muslim.¹

The first troupe of Indian magicians or jugglers as they were known arrived in Australia just after the start of the Gold Rushes. On 21 May 1853, in Melbourne, Rowe’s American Circus presented five Indian jugglers. Playbills described as the ‘soothsayers of India’—their astonishing feats of snake charming, sword swallowing, bullet catching, fire breathing and balancing were “impossible to explain” (“Wonders of Wonders: Rowe’s American Circus” 8). The term “juggler” became synonymous with Indian magic in the nineteenth century. A juggler’s repertoire typically consisted of juggling balls, balancing acts, acrobatics, sword swallowing and what is typically regarded as sleight-of-hand magic. In India, jugglers normally travelled in troupes together with fortune-tellers, nautch dancers, snake charmers, performing animals as well as acrobats and tumblers. They were itinerants, and as such were classified as criminal castes and tribes during the nineteenth century (see van Woerkens). The first Indian jugglers arrived in England in the 1810s. One of them, Ramo Samee, became the most famous Indian magician of the nineteenth century and toured throughout England, Europe and America. The presence of Indian and other Oriental performers at this time would have a profound impact on Western popular culture (Dadswell 5-7).

News of the phenomenal success of jugglers such as Samee filtered back to India prompting others to follow in his wake. By the end of the century thousands of “spectacular performers,” as they became known, were being recruited for a range of purposes from ethnographic and department store displays to international exhibitions such as the Exposition Internationale in Paris in 1900, which was viewed by 60 million people. Often illiterate and impoverished, show people from India and other British colonies such as Burma and Ceylon were easily lured into travelling abroad with the promise that they would be richly rewarded. Recruiters ranged from ship captains sensing an opportunity to supplement their income by adding a troupe of conjurers to their cargos, to professional entertainment entrepreneurs operating in what had become by the end of the nineteenth century sophisticated globalized entertainment networks.

The development of these networks can be traced back to the gold rushes in California, which began in 1848 and then spread to Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850s. The rapid influx of immigrants and the immense wealth pouring out of the mines created an extremely profitable and largely untapped cultural market. Taking advantage of established imperial transport networks troupes of entertainers flooded the gold fields and adjacent towns and

¹ In 1880, the entrepreneur Harry Lyons brought the “Afghan Museum and Oriental Curiosity Bazaar” to Victoria. The troupe was billed as consisting of “Cabul jugglers and East Indian Magicians” and included Koodah Cassim Bukos, a fire eater, and Buchas Mahomet Khan, a ventriloquist. While there is no evidence that any members of the troupe came from Afghanistan, it is clear that the majority were Muslims, probably recruited in the vicinity of Lucknow. Hugh Simmons (stage name Dr Lynn), who in 1877 became the first Western magician to recruit Indian jugglers and bring them back to England, selected three Muslims: Sheikh Gheesa, who excelled at the basket trick, Syed Emmann, a fire eater and snake charmer and Mohie Deen, a young boy who acted as their assistant (“Naturalist Hindoo Snake-Charmers” 3).

cities. They included minstrels, magicians, equestrians, musicians, acrobats and circus companies reflecting the range of Western popular entertainments at the time. Minstrel shows and circuses in particular were particularly adaptable because they required relatively less capital and were able to perform in range of venues (Wittman 28). From the 1860s onwards, locations such as the theatre stage, the big top and later the cinema screen became relay stations for a process of transnational exchange that involved the whole gamut of performance genres. These locations became places of both competition and collaboration between European and Indian entertainers. This process involved dialogue, appropriation, exchange, negotiation, contestation and hybridization. Magic shows, Shakespearian dramas and circus displays influenced local entertainment forms. The training and experience that Australian actors received while touring through India and other parts of Asia gave them a cosmopolitan and transnational outlook and an entree into the worldwide theatrical labour market.

The majority of this trade in popular culture took place along two circuits. The first ran from the West Coast of America across the Pacific and East Asia. The other led from England through South and South East Asia. The final destination was often Australia, which was seen as a stable and lucrative market for popular entertainers. Melbourne in particular was a favoured destination. Thanks to the Gold Rushes, its population quadrupled from 29,000 in 1851 to 123,000 in 1854, making it the largest English-speaking city in the Pacific region (Wittman 47). Indian show people were usually recruited by agents and made to sign contracts with little if any legal standing, promising a return passage and a monthly salary. Individual travel was rare. Although it is unclear when Cassim and Abdallah arrived in Australia or whether they came on their own accord or were recruited in-country, it appears they were engaged by Burton's Equestrian Circus sometime in 1861 ("The Murder at Sawpit Creek" 2).

The early entertainment circuits that Cassim and Abdallah took advantage of were zones of contestation reflecting the complex relationship between performers and the local societies that variously accommodated or resisted their presence. Indian performers were not seen as competitors in the same way that American minstrel companies were, but they still had to operate in a crowded and anarchic marketplace that reflected the frontier nature of popular entertainment. Troupes of performers from Japan and China were another source of competition. Nevertheless, Cassim and Abdallah enjoyed considerable success. By November 1861, they had saved more than £100, which they entrusted Madhoul to send back to their families in India. Madhoul also offered his services as their manager as he could speak English and was therefore able to arrange shows and contracts for the men who were confident enough of their own talents and popularity to leave Burton's circus and branch out on their own ("Parliamentary Papers: The Case of Mahomet Cassim" 2).

Despite their success, they remained marginalized figures. The majority of Indians in New South Wales at the time were labourers, agricultural workers, goldminers, merchants and hawkers. In India, Cassim and Abdallah's acts of juggling and conjuring occupied the lowest rung of popular culture. Once charged with Madhoul's murder, the jugglers went from being curious spectacles of Oriental life to debased examples of humanity. The objectification of groups such as itinerant show people was reflected in the reporting of their trial. Queanbeyan's *Golden Age* newspaper said the prisoners "appeared to treat the matter very lightly, the younger of them (Abdallah) throughout the whole of the examination smiling and glancing carelessly around the court. The older of the men (Cassim) is of very fierce and forbidding countenance, just such a man as one would judge to be capable of any atrocity"

(“The Murder at Sawpit Creek” 2). The newspaper later welcomed Cassim’s execution. As a resident of Australia, he had placed himself under the protection of British law, it said in an editorial. That same legal system, however, was “duty bound to avenge the death of one who confided in its protection, as well as to punish those who disregarded its authority” (“The Murder at Sawpit Gully” 2).

Colonial NSW in the mid-nineteenth century was a violent place and incidents of disputes over money leading to murder were not uncommon. What made Cassim and Abdallah’s case different? The sensational nature of the alleged crime and the circumstances of their arrest, trial and conviction were controversial and received wide coverage. But there was also a sense that the men had been denied a fair trial and their conviction was not only a miscarriage of justice, it also threatened the civil liberties of the colony. Leading to campaign to have the men retried was *The Empire* newspaper. Founded in 1851 by the father of Australia’s Federation Henry Parkes, it was the most liberal newspaper of its time. It was one of the leading voices lobbying against capital punishment and continued to champion unpopular causes even after Parkes quit as editor in 1858. In 1852, *The Empire* argued against bringing in Eurasians from India, but two years later Parkes himself organized for a group of twenty-four Eurasians from Madras to work in the newspaper’s Sydney office as compositors, calling them “intelligent and responsible young men” and “the sons of Englishmen by Indian mothers” (qtd. in Woollacott 79).

The sentencing of Cassim and Abdallah was criticized by *The Empire* in an editorial that argued they had been convicted “on insufficient evidence”:

It is impossible that the sentence of death can be carried out on such evidence. Nor can the sentence be commuted for the evidence does not warrant punishment of any kind. The men must be discharged. There is no proof, we repeat, of a murder having been committed at all. (“Editorial” 4)

If such cases were allowed to pass unchecked, the editorial continued,

the country will suffer as much from the protectors, as from the violators, of its laws. Better even that we should be plundered on the highway, than that our lives and liberties should be endangered by the insidious perversions of ignorant or panic-stricken interpreters of law. (“Editorial” 4)

The newspaper received backing for its stand from John Bowie Wilson, the local member for Goldfields South, where Sawpit Gully was located. Born in Scotland in 1820, Wilson emigrated to Australia in 1854 and lived as a squatter in southern New South Wales and then as a gold digger. An ultra-radical politician, he campaigned unsuccessfully to abolish all state aid to religion and to sell off Church and school lands and have the money raised put into consolidated revenue. Wilson was also a spiritualist. When Wilson saw the skull allegedly belonging to Madhoul produced in court, he was convinced that it was of an individual who had been dead for far longer than fifteen months as claimed by the prosecution. He arranged for the skull to be examined by a forensic expert who concluded it was of a man had been dead for up to forty years. Wilson also raised concerns about the conduct of the trial. Not only did Cassim and Abdallah not understand English, neither the judge nor the jury would have understood them. “The whole of the circumstances are such as to demand the fullest investigation before the executive can be justified in allowing the law to take its course,” he wrote in a letter published in *The Empire* (“Editorial” 4). There is also evidence that the men

were given sympathetic treatment while in jail. According to *Freeman's Journal*, in the lead up to his execution, the chief goaler at Goulburn jail "allowed Cassim every latitude possible in carrying out the Mahomedan rites." Cassim was also allowed to perform special prayers in the yard of the jail and his brother was able to wash his body with eggs, prior to his death. Two warders remained with Cassim in his cell on his final night. "He seemed very much pleased at their presence" ("Execution of Mahomet Cassim", *Freeman's Journal* 5).

Wilson's intervention failed to prevent Cassim's execution, but on 2 July 1863 he moved in the NSW legislative assembly that the returns relevant to the trial be tabled before Parliament. Having reviewed the circumstances of the case, Wilson concluded that if the criminal had been a European, he would never have been executed. He also questioned why one of the accused had been hung while the other had been reprieved when the evidence was identical in both cases. There was no proof, he asserted, that a murder had even been committed. Making the judge's report to the Governor on the murder trial public set a legal precedent. Opponents of the move argued that in future judges would be constrained from expressing their opinions on a case. In an editorial criticizing the decision, *The Sydney Morning Herald* said that

if the principle of universal publicity is to be adopted, there are many occasions on which the public interest will greatly suffer. It is by no means certain that the whole facts of every case will be disclosed; because wherever there are great reasons for secrecy, a more circuitous but certain method will be adopted to preserve it.' ("Editorial" 4)

Although the tabling of the papers produced no smoking gun, they are invaluable in providing information on the lives of these individuals who existed at the extreme margins of nineteenth century popular culture. Cassim and Abdallah's case is an example of how stories of these subaltern figures are revealed only after their mistreatment becomes the subject of court appearances, official inquiries or correspondence between different branches of government.

The scattered references to Indian jugglers in Australia in the 1870s relate to Europeans who performed "Indian juggling"—a continuation of a trend that began in Australia as early as the 1840s when local magicians adopted Oriental attire, names and incorporated Indian, Japanese and Chinese tricks into their shows. In 1880, the Australian theatrical entrepreneur Harry Lyons brought out the "Afghan Museum and Oriental Living Wonders." It was advertised as including: "East Indian jugglers. A Nautch Wallah or Hindoo Dancing Girls. Native Ventriloquist, and Imitator of Birds, Beasts and Reptiles." It also featured a "collection of Brahmin views," costumes, curiosities and musical instruments and was promoted as being "approved by the Clergy and Educational Boards, and patronized by the elite" ("Lyons' Afghan Museum" 3). The Afghan Museum is significant because it was the earliest example of a cultural display featuring Indians in Australia. Its religious and pedagogic endorsement was intended to give what was otherwise purely commercial entertainment an imperial and scientific totality. Although it was small in scale, it followed the trend for displaying native villages at world fairs and international exhibitions in Europe and America (see Greenhalgh; Mathur). Initially these mostly comprised artisans, waiters and chefs from European colonies in Africa, South America and Asia. Troupes of magicians, dancers and acrobats from South Asia did not appear in large numbers until the mid-1880s, after which the recruitment of show people from the subcontinent suddenly became a lucrative business for entrepreneurs.

One of those who recognized an opportunity for bringing exotic show people to Australia was Charles Bastard—described by Calcutta’s Deputy Commissioner of Police as “a collector of curiosities and manager of a skating rink.”² Bastard, who was from Adelaide, went into partnership with his chief figure skater, an American named Henry Washburn and recruited a dozen Indians as well as a collection of curiosities. The “Museum of Indian Curiosities” opened in Adelaide in June 1889. The *Evening Journal* reported that such a large crowd attended the opening night that temporary platforms had to be erected (“The Indian Museum” 3). The curiosities included a five-legged cow, weapons, musical instruments, shoes, trays, inlaid marble work, idols, toys, ornaments, armour, and a brass model of the Golden Temple at Benares. The performers consisted of “three pretty young women, said to be Queens of the late King of Oudh, who sat in a canopied apartment smoking an Indian hookah”; Hunisraj, “a chief from Gwalior, who was also attired in expensive garments” and had a beard “of extraordinary length”; the “monkey boys,” described as “novel specimens of humanity”; and a contortionist who moved like a snake. There was also Paineer Pindarrum, “a juggler of high order” who demonstrated the cups and balls trick, produced fire from his mouth and spat out dozens of two-inch-long nails, and Galip Sahib who executed the Basket Trick with a young girl named Giddy (“The Indian Museum,” *South Australian Register* 6). The greatest curiosity was a fifteen-year-old boy from Benares named Murshy Samee who, in addition to having a deformed body and legs, had a head thirty-eight-inches in circumference.

Bastard, who was a lessee of Adelaide’s City Baths, housed the troupe in rooms at the rear of the building. Their caused considerable interest and attracted widespread press coverage. *The Express and Telegraph* noted that despite their rudimentary accommodation “the utmost harmony prevails amongst the different performers. They vary in the matter of caste, and have been got together from different parts of India.” In a highly condescending tone the article went on to describe the eating habits of the monkey boys:

They feed with their hands from a curious mixture, into whose ingredients it was thought best not to enquire. They cannot speak to one another, having no language, but one of them every now and again mumbles a sing-song imitation of a Brahmanic prayer which he has picked up in one of the temples. The whole troupe are divided into small coteries, each with its own fire and cooking utensils. The queens are Mohammedan, the rest are of various shades of Hindooism (“Commercial” 2).

After a successful three-week season in Adelaide, Bastard and Washburn travelled to Melbourne where they took out a lease on the old wax works and set up the Royal Museum and Grand Palace of Amusement. According the press reports, the venue, which opened on 20 July 1889 enjoyed steady patronage with its profusion of “Indian jugglers, acrobats, necromancers, etc.,” performing in one part of the building and Frank Lacey’s flea circus in another. The *Melbourne Punch* thought the monkey boys “twice as funny, as the average corner-men attached to a Christy Minstrel show” (“The Playgoer” 9).

² Charles Bastard was also referred to as Charles Roberts Bastard or Charles Roberts in both official reports and newspaper articles. The reference to him being manager of skating rink in Calcutta is from National Archives of India: “Regarding Certain Natives of Madras Who Were Conveyed by a Mr Roberts from India to Australia,” Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration, 21 Apr. 1890, Proceedings Nos 19-22.

Within a few weeks of their arrival in Melbourne, the tone of the press coverage changed. On 15 August 1889, Melbourne's *Age* newspaper under the facetious headline "A Happy Family," reported that the jugglers and monkey boys were "not the easiest persons in the world to get on with." Since their arrival in Melbourne they had made numerous complaints "against the management, against the public—against everything and everybody." Soonder, whose role was to look after brother, the large-headed man, got drunk and started arguing with the show's manager, Harry Friedman. The argument ended with the Indian "burying his teeth in Mr Friedman's arm," tearing his clothes and trying to jump out of a window before being locked up in a police cell. Based on Soonder's behavior, the paper concluded that allegations of mistreatment had "no existence outside the imagination of the malcontents" ("A Happy Family" 6).

Things took a turn for the worse in late October when one of the jugglers, Paine Pindarrum, committed suicide. In its reporting, *The Age* did nothing to hide its racial prejudices, blaming the death on the "long-standing and scarcely hidden discontent existing among the band of low caste Hindoos." The paper noted that Pindarrum had earlier witnessed a "ludicrous quarrel" between Bastard and another juggler when the latter exceeded his daily allowance of two glasses of whiskey. When the juggler refused to perform, Bastard allegedly struck him and called him a pig. Pindarrum and other members of the troupe were also informed that their return to India would be postponed despite their six-month contract coming to an end. "It seems that life in the little improvised caravansary on the floor above the Royal Museum is by no means a bed of roses" commented the paper, describing the mood among the Indians as one of "open jealousies and hidden ill feelings" ("Suicide at Royal Museum" 7). At a coroner's inquest, Bastard blamed the suicide on the Pindarrum's heavy drinking. Another member of the troupe, however, accused Bastard of threatening to imprison the juggler after a disturbance a week earlier. The evidence was dismissed by the jury, which found alcoholism was the reason the man took his own life. During the course of the inquest it emerged that the troupe was housed eight people to a room. One of the police inspectors recommended that instead of being exhibited, the monkey boys be put into an insane asylum ("The Juggler's Suicide" 5).

Minus one of their jugglers, the troupe resumed performances in late October, but their return to the stage was short-lived. On 7 November 1889, the troupe staged what the local press described as a "mutiny" and marched down Melbourne's main street to the District Court. According to the *Melbourne Herald*, members of the public stood aghast at the spectacle, particularly the Monkey Boys who "squealed and kicked and romped around like little puppy dogs" when they were refused entry into the court (qtd. in "The Melbourne Palace of Amusement" 2). Eventually they were allowed to appear before the presiding magistrate and demanded their return passages to India now that their contracts had expired. The two men who had recruited them, however, were now unable to honor their contracts. Washburn had been convicted of embezzlement, and Bastard was facing similar charges. Despite these facts, the judge showed little sympathy for the plight of the jugglers, focusing instead on the potential inconvenience they posed. If individuals such as Bastard continued to indulge in the trade of show people: "We shall soon have all the lunacy of the East out here, and consequently a great nuisance will be imposed upon the State" ("Those Indians Again" 6). He gave Bastard until the following Monday to arrange for return passages.

The passing of the deadline without a resolution brought matters to a head. Once again, the Indian troupe marched down Swanston Street to the City Court where they took up position in a yard adjacent to the building and refused to move. This time when the police arrested one

of the men the chief juggler started gesticulating wildly to the others. When the crowd grew to such an extent that the traffic was interrupted, the police locked all the Indians up on a charge of insulting behaviour. “They resisted violently,” *The Argus* reported. “The idiots, known as the Monkey Boys, fighting with teeth and nails” (“The Palace of Amusement” 5). When they were brought before the court the following day, an interpreter explained to the judge that the “Queens of Oudh” were in fact low caste women from Madras and that the “monkey boys” were the offspring of a leprous mother. With no prospect of their contracts being honoured and the conduct of the case reflecting poorly on the governance and policing of the state, it was agreed that the Victorian government repatriate the group at the cost of £11 per person. They arrived back in Madras on 31 December 1889. Only the three so-called ex-Queens of Oudh, who the local press speculated were in fact prostitutes, elected to remain in Australia. Hobart’s *Colonist* newspaper was one of the few that laid blame on the show’s management, writing: “We are at one with those who think human monstrosities and horrors should not be allowed admission within our borders. They can serve no good object, and are simply paraded for the filthy lucre-loving enterprising managers who ape Barnum” (“Stage Whispers” 17).

The case of the Royal Museum reveals the changing attitudes towards show people since the early 1860s. It is evident from reporting in *The Age* and other newspapers that the Indians were categorized as being untrustworthy and troublemakers—even while there was mounting evidence that the troupe’s management was corrupt and dysfunctional. When the Indians attempted to overcome their powerlessness through public protests, the emphasis was not on their rights but on the unseemly public spectacle they created. According to Mark St Leon, the leading authority on the history of the Australian circus, there was hardening of, “Old World” attitudes as cities and towns began to emerge into prosperity and respectability in the decades following the gold rushes (St Leon 33-34). These attitudes accompanied the arrival of more erudite immigrants not the least of whom were “a class of journalist-editors educated in Britain” and, directly or indirectly, contributed to the formation of public opinion. The novelty status that circus and circus people enjoyed on the goldfields was reappraised. Exponents of popular culture such as “travelling Jews with trinkets, organ-grinders, German bands, Ethiopian serenaders, circuses, electro-biologists, and people of that class” were “now felt to be great nuisances” (St Leon 14). Indian hawkers, competing against their Australian counterparts, were represented as a threat to women on farms, whom they would pressure strongly to buy their goods. In 1893, the premier of NSW drew the attention of his counterparts in other colonies to “the influx of Syrians, Indians and other non-Europeans who are becoming the source of increasing annoyance and trouble” (qtd. in Jupp 482). Margaret Allen, describing migration from the Punjab to Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century notes the increasing hostility towards itinerant Indian hawkers in the Australian colonies during the 1890s. “Racial prejudice was central to this social anxiety. Indian hawkers, although they were British subjects, were marginalised in emerging white Australia because of their race” (45). Nadia Rhook, in her study of Indian hawkers in Victoria in the final decades of the nineteenth century notes: “The construction of Indian hawkers as a ‘nuisance’ was part of a broader sociolegal phenomenon of the marginalization of nomadic people, vagrants, gypsies, and (debatably) larrikins” (112). Bastard’s jugglers and human curiosities fitted squarely in this category.

Countering this narrative of victimhood was the fact that members of the troupe had asserted their rights in the most public of ways—marching down the main street of Melbourne on not one, but two occasions, and taking their grievances directly to the courts and the police. I see three reasons for this. Firstly, news of previous incidents involving Indian show people being

exploited and seeking redress in the courts, particularly in England, would have been known among communities of performers in India. According to a report prepared for the Government of Madras in 1913, recruitment of show people was concentrated in certain areas such as the district of Tanjore in south India and therefore such experiences would have been easily shared (see “Repatriation of a Troupe of Indians and Singalese from Germany”). Secondly, the troupe received support from members of Melbourne’s Indian community who lobbied the Victorian authorities to act as interpreters and probably gave them some rudimentary legal advice. In the course of the quarter century that had passed since Cassim and Abdallah’s trial, the number of Indians in cities such as Melbourne had grown considerably and included doctors, merchants, hawkers and boarding house keepers (see Holroyde and Westrip; Rhook). Finally, members of the troupe would have been driven by sheer desperation. One of the jugglers had died, others had been abused, and all would have been alarmed at being abandoned on the streets of Melbourne. It would later emerge in the official police report on the case sent to the Governor of Madras that they had been too afraid to speak out against Bastard when police or doctors went to investigate the conditions they were living in. They were also forced to eat meat, even though it went against their religion, and they were underpaid (see National Archives of India, “Regarding Certain Natives”).

In 1900, the case of the jugglers would be one of more than a dozen cited in an official report to the Viceroy Lord Curzon on the need to reform emigration laws governing “spectacular performers” and artisans. The report recommended measures to be taken to protect them against exploitation and being abandoned on the streets of London and various European capitals forcing the India Office to step in and cover the cost of their repatriation. Those reforms, which included mandatory deposits being lodged by recruiters, were passed in 1903 but had little overall effect (see National Archives of India, “Proposed Amendment”).

To conclude, the complex careers and identities of Indian jugglers and troupes of show people who arrived in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century enable us to understand more deeply the multifaceted historiographies of Britain, South Asia, and the transnational relationships between them, even as they challenge comfortable classifications. The contrasting experiences of two groups of jugglers—Cassim and Abdallah and those recruited by Robert Bastard—have been examined in the context of prevailing attitudes towards itinerant show people from India. The largely rural, predominantly Anglo society that Cassim and Abdallah encountered when charged with the murder of an Indian hawker showed little sympathy for itinerants from India even though they had been attached to a leading circus. The jury was swift in finding the brothers guilty despite questions over crucial aspects of the evidence used to convict them. Despite his libertarian leanings, the judge showed no leniency when sentencing both men to be hanged. Nevertheless, the two brothers put up an eloquent defence and found sympathy from prison authorities and support from politicians and sections of the press who believed that a miscarriage of justice had taken place. By the time the “Museum of Indian Curiosities” opened in Adelaide in 1899, Australia was a much more prosperous, urban and cosmopolitan society. Nevertheless, attitudes had hardened towards Indians, particularly hawkers, who were seen as a threat to both local businesses and white women. The fact that members of the troupe so publicly demonstrated their discontent only added to the public’s hostility. Their repatriation was in large part due to lobbying from the local Indian community and the fact that no other options were available to the government as the entrepreneurs who had brought them to Victoria had no financial capacity to do so and had themselves broken the law. The experiences of the two groups highlight how the spaces that brought players, spectators and promoters together tended to replicate and reinforce the dynamics of the unequal relationship that existed between

colonizer and colonized. They also demonstrate, however, that even the most marginalized figures were able to influence the authority of urban and imperial officials by exercising their own limited powers and harnessing the support of sympathizers.

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