**Ambiguous decolonisation: a postcolonial reading of the IHRM strategy of the Burmah Oil Company**

ABSTRACT  
This paper uses the lens of postcolonial theory to determine the extent to which colonial features persisted in the organizational culture of the Burmah Oil Company (BOC) after decolonisation in South Asia. It does this through an examination of the evolving staffing strategies of the BOC and its South Asian (especially Indian) subsidiaries before and after 1947. Through an analysis of archival material and company literature, we demonstrate that the BOC switched from an ethnocentric to a polycentric staffing strategy very gradually, with senior managerial positions being occupied by British managers into the 1970s, well after other British MNEs operating in India had already made this transition. We suggest that this persistence of colonial modes of organisation contributed to the BOC’s tense relations with the Indian government, and the latter’s decision to nationalise the firm.

KEYWORDS

Oil industry, Burmah Oil Company, postcolonial management theory, HRM policies, Indian government, decolonisation, coloniality, ethnocentric staffing strategies.

# **Introduction**

There is a growing body of historiography on the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the evolution of business in Asia (Horesh, 2014; Benedict, 2011; Mollan, 2012; Misra, 1999; White, 2004; Yacob and White, 2010; Webster et al., 2015; Smith, 2016; Lubinski, 2014). This research has documented the manifold ways in which Western imperialism shaped firm strategies in the colonized and semi-colonized countries of Asia. During the era of empire, the power imbalance between Westerners and so-called ‘natives’ of this region influenced the behaviour of European multinationals and, crucially, the Westerners who managed these firms. As Geoffrey Jones has noted, a ‘surprising number’ of the multinational firms founded in the institutional context of colonialism were able to survive decolonization and are still extant. Their numbers include such important companies as HSBC and Unilever. In contrast, other European multinationals were unable to adapt to the end of empire and the system of attitudes that went with it (Jones, 2015, p. 129) The rise of Asian economies has prompted some academics and journalists to announce the end of Western global economic and cultural primacy (Rachman, 2016). These writers suggest that Western imperialism is now just ‘ancient history’, a backstory with limited relevance to understanding how multinationals operate in the present. The implication of this position is that colonialism ended a very long time ago and we need not refer to it when seeking to understand present-day multinational firms. In contrast, our reading stresses continuities and the persistence of colonialist attitudes long after the end of formal imperialism.

This paper, a study of the Burmah Oil Company’s subsidiaries on the Indian sub-continent before and after 1947 (Bamberg, 2000), seeks to determine the extent to which the organizational culture of the BOC became less colonial after political independence.[[1]](#footnote-1) We do so by examining the extent to which staffing policy changed in the wake of decolonization. Although the paper refers briefly to the experience of BOC’s experience in Pakistan, Burma, and East Pakistan/Bangladesh, its focus is on its subsidiary in the Republic of India. This focus was determined by the nature of the surviving primary sources. The paper shows that the process of promoting local people to positions of real authority in the firm’s India subsidiaries was a complicated one that was driven largely by pressure from local governments rather than being something that was embarked on with willingness by the firm’s headquarters. Our paper is not primarily about how the firm interacted with the British state in the period surrounding decolonization. Nor is this paper another account of how a British firm lobbied in Whitehall and Westminster to protect its interest once it saw that decolonization was inevitable. Instead, our focus is on the internal dynamics of the firm and the question of the extent to which Western employees should have to share power and resources with local managers and technical experts within the firm.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, this paper will help us to construct a new system of historical periodization for thinking about the transition from coloniality to postcoloniality in British international business. The paper shows that the BOC did not rapidly shed its colonialist features when India and Pakistan became independent in 1947. Instead, the process was very gradual and undertaken only grudgingly by the firm in the face of considerable political pressure. As late as the 1970s, the senior managerial positions were still occupied by British expatriates. We contrast the slow pace of change at BOC with the more rapid changes at Unilever’s Indian subsidiary in the same approximate period: between the late 1930s to the early 1960s, Unilever successfully switched from an ethnocentric to polycentric staffing strategy in India. We show that BOC failed to do so and likely suffered as a result. Although BOC did make some moves in the direction of a more polycentric strategy, its efforts were ultimately too little, too late. We suggest that the persistence of colonial attitudes in BOC likely exacerbated the firm’s tense relations with the Indian government. We suggest, somewhat more speculatively, that the failure to appease local nationalist sentiment via an accelerated Indianization of the subsidiary’s senior management team may have contributed to the Indian government’s decision to nationalise the firm.

# **Literature review**

We begin by presenting a multi-part literature review. We consider first mainstream approaches to the study of International Human Resource Management (IHRM), before providing, in contrast, an introduction to Postcolonial Theory. Thereafter we move through the historiography of business in India, the historiography of the impact of decolonization on the IHRM practices of British firms in India, and, finally, the historiography of BOC.

## ***IHRM Research***

Academic research on International Human Resource Management (IHRM) originated in the 1960s, when researchers began to notice dramatic shifts in the way multinational firms were staffing their global operations. The key text was a 1969 paper by Howard Perlmutter that noted that US and European multinationals were becoming less ethnocentric about whom they appointed to managerial positions in their overseas subsidiaries (Perlmutter, 1969). Prior to that point, multinationals had, in general, exclusively used home-country nationals to manage their overseas operations, particularly in developing countries. These firms would employ local workers to perform manual labour and other menial tasks, but technical and managerial functions were reserved for people of the same nationality and ethnicity as the directors of the firm. Subsequently, Perlmutter developed a typology of four main strategies that MNCs adopt in managing their workforces: ethnocentric, polycentric, regiocentric and geocentric (Heenan and Perlmutter, 1979; Perlmutter, 1968). Perlmutter’s terminology and his conceptual framework continues to be debated and refined by researchers in international management and strategy (Michailova et al., 2017).

Empirical research on IHRM has explored the costs and benefits of each of these strategies. An ethnocentric IHRM strategy has some advantages, as it helps to ensure the perspective of the overseas subsidiary is aligned with that of the home country managers. It also eliminates language and cultural barriers, at least at managerial levels. An ethnocentric IHRM strategy may also make sense when a firm’s subsidiaries are located in countries with under-developed education systems in which few locals are qualified to fill technical and managerial roles. The downsides of this approach include the loss of valuable local contextual knowledge, the greater cost of sending expatriates and their families overseas, and, crucially, antagonising local nationalist sentiment. As we show below, BOC continued to use an ethnocentric IHRM strategy long after the Indian subcontinent achieved independence in 1947. We also show that its relations with the Indian government deteriorated steadily, a process that culminated with the nationalization of its main assets in 1976.

Similarly, a polycentric IHRM strategy has both upsides and downsides. The upsides include benefits that come from the knowledge and political connections of the locally hired managers, but there is also the risk that these managers will begin to run the subsidiary in their own interests, rather than those of the parent corporation. A regiocentric IHRM strategy is broadly similarly to a polycentric one, except that managers are moved around between neighbouring countries, thereby sharing knowledge of best practice and allowing for greater regional coordination. While such a strategy may be appropriate when relations between neighbouring countries are generally good (as in the European Union), it can be inappropriate when tensions within a region complicate the exchange of goods and people between nations, as was the case in the Indian subcontinent after partition. IHRM theory would predict that BOC would not develop a regiocentric staffing strategy in its subsidiaries in the Indian sub-continent and this prediction is entirely consistent with our reading of the primary sources, which revealed no evidence of any moves towards a regiocentric strategy after 1947.

A geocentric IHRM strategy involves taking the best and the brightest locally hired managers and moving them around the firm, including into posts in the global head office. This approach allows the firm to take advantage of a global talent pool without worrying about an individual’s nationality. This strategy can promote a global mind-set among a firm’s cadre of top managers and can improve morale in foreign subsidiaries. Unfortunately, this strategy is particularly expensive to execute well, especially when communications costs are high (Lakshman et al., 2017). The high costs associated with the geocentric strategy helps to explain why it was only adopted relatively recently (after 1980). Geocentric IHRM strategies were first used by US multinationals and were adopted later, and with apparently greater reluctance, by European and then Japanese multinationals, which retained ethnocentric staffing policies for longer (Kopp, 1994). Data published in 1982 shows that US MNCs in developing countries were much more likely to hire local citizens for senior positions than were European multinationals operating in the same region (Tung, 1982, Table 2).

## ***Postcolonial theory***

IHRM theory is interested, then, in inter-country and inter-regional differences. However, it typically does not situate those differences in terms of international structures of power, or the cultural and ideological systems that underpin and maintain those structures. In contrast, postcolonial researchers in other areas of social science are interested in the persistence of the ideas that Westerners created to legitimate their political, military, and economic interventions in countries in the non-Western world. Deriving inspiration from Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Derek Gregory, postcolonial scholars are interested in establishing when, or rather if, colonialism ended. Many strands of postcolonialist theory argue that colonialist modes of thought remained long after the attainment of political independence. Around the year 2000, management academics began to call for the application of postcolonial theory to the study of international business (Prasad, 2003; Banerjee and Linstead, 2004). A key text here was the manifesto by Robert Westwood and Gavin Jack (2007).

In response to such calls, postcolonial management academics have applied postcolonial thought in researching the contemporary operations of multinational firms and in documenting the colonialist origins of contemporary management theory and practice (Prasad and Qureshi, 2017; Decker, 2010; Frenkel and Shenhav, 2006; Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Boussebaa et al., 2014; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017).

By showing the colonial attitudes and practices have persisted into the present, or at least long after the end of formal European colonial rule, postcolonial management scholars have contributed to our understanding of the thorny issues of historical periodization relating to the end of the European colonial empires. Postcolonial management research suggests that the end of coloniality in multinational firms was gradual. For scholars of international business history, this reframing of the chronology of decolonization raises the question of when British MNEs operating in Commonwealth countries ceased to be colonialist.

We propose that postcolonial theory would interpret the fact that European multinationals, many of which were headquartered in countries that had formerly ruled colonial empires, were slow to abandon the ethnocentric IHRM model was due to the persistence of colonialist modes of thought in the cultures of these nations and firms. The evolution of the IHRM system of BOC, a British company, is consistent with this broader pattern and argument. The company’s move away from ethnocentric IHRM strategy towards a more polycentric one was, extremely gradual, never entirely complete and, apparently, grudging. Our reading of the primary sources suggests that to the extent that BOC began to fill senior technical and managerial posts with Indians, this decision was motivated by the desire to placate India’s nationalist government rather than other considerations, such as an appreciation of the improving quality of Indian engineering and management graduates. Moreover, while the firm moved in the direction of the polycentric IHRM strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, none of the changes in its staffing policy suggest that it considered adopting anything resembling a geocentric IHRM strategy.

## ***Historiography of Indian business***

IHRM strategies unfold in specific national contexts. We study BOC’s IHRM strategy in the context of South Asia and India specifically. The field of Indian business history is rapidly growing in terms of the number of scholars active in it. The field, previously dominated by commissioned and corporate histories, is increasingly characterised by serious academic research. The primary focus of historians of Indian business remains the country’s large firms. Large firms active on the subcontinent either side of 1947 fall into three main categories: (a) British managing agencies, (b) Indian- owned and managed firms, and (c) the subsidiaries of foreign MNEs, British or otherwise. Firms in the first category have received the greatest attention from economic and business historians. These scholars have published a series of studies that show that these managing agencies dominated the organised economy for much of the colonial period (Kling, 1966; Oonk, 2001; Ray, 1982; Aldous, 2015). Indian- owned and managed firms have also attracted the attention of Indian business historians, and their evolution in the period between Independence and the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 has been discussed in a variety of works including popular histories and biographies of industrial leaders (Piramal, 1998; Piramal, **1998b**; Lala, 1981).

Unfortunately, the Indian subsidiaries of foreign multinationals have received far less attention from Indian business historians, notwithstanding the fact that they played a very important part in the Indian economy from the interwar period through to the 1970s. They have been seen as a modernising influence in terms of their business strategies and willingness to invest in technology, in contrast to the more conservative, mercantile approach of the managing agencies (Misra, 1999). One of the few historians to discuss these firms at any length is Maria Misra. She argues that the Indian subsidiaries of some MNEs in this period had a relatively progressive approach to staffing: some of these firms, including Burmah-Shell, the Indian trading representative of the Burmah Oil Company, understood the importance of Indianization (at least in the interests of ‘political expediency’) even before Independence To a certain extent, she contrasts the willingness of the MNCs to promote Indians to positions of authority and expertise with the more conservative attitude of the British managing agencies. Yet, as Misra notes, ‘[o]ne should not exaggerate the differences between the agency houses and the multinationals’ in this respect (Misra, p. 206). The present study shows that, leaving aside the comparison with the managing agencies, there were important continuities in the staffing policy of the Burmah Oil Company and its subsidiaries before and after Independence.

## ***Historiography of the impact of decolonization/indigenisation on the IHRM strategies of British MNEs***

Building on the preceding discussion, we note that business historians with an interest in the workforces of British MNEs have written about the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism in MNEs that were established in the heyday of the British Empire and that are still in operation today. These researchers are interested in the process by which the firms went from having ethnocentric IHRM strategies to less overtly colonialist and discriminatory approaches that correspond to the regiocentric, polycentric, or geocentric strategies identified by IHRM scholars. Their studies of different countries, regions, and industries suggest that the transition from colonial to post-colonial IHRM took place at different points in the case of each company but broadly within the period from the late 1930s to the early 1980s. These research outputs differ considerably in terms of the disciplinary backgrounds of their authors and the research methods used. However, it is possible to come to some general conclusions about the nature of the shift from coloniality to postcoloniality in British MNEs based on these studies. A common theme is that the shift from coloniality to postcoloniality in IHRM was gradual, marked by considerable resistance within firms, and rarely if ever coincided with political Independence.

This is the lesson one can take away from Jones (1995), a monograph-length study of British multinational banking from 1830 to 1990. Jones is a methodologically conservative business historian who does not directly engage with postcolonial theory; nonetheless he examines the various forces, particularly political ones, that have influenced British global banks. Much of the book deals with British banks in Asia, since many of Britain’s banking multinationals have their origins in that area during the era of Empire and colonialism. Tracking the cultural shifts that paralleled the end of empire, Jones grapples with the issue of the transition to postcoloniality in the sections of the book about human resource management policy in British banking multinationals. He shows that until c. 1935 all British banking multinationals pursued policies that were uniformly ethnocentric, with all executive-level positions reserved for white British men. Jones notes that the first tentative moves to raise the status of indigenous staff in the British multinational banks took place in the inter-war period.

After 1945, ‘nationalist criticism of foreign banks and competition from local banks suggested that the British banks needed to assume stronger local identities’ by hiring and promoting more locals (Jones, 1990, p.315). Jones uses internal records to show that proposals for such reforms were often contentious within banks. He observes that ‘among the Eastern Exchange banks’ there were marked differences ‘in the speed they moved on changing the status of local staff. The Mercantile Bank of India had begun to recruit Asians to executive positions in the mid-1930s’ but this move was resisted for longer in the other banks, such as HSBC (Jones, 1995 p.316; Smith, 2016) Jones’ narrative shows that the transition towards a less colonial staffing policy took decades to complete and was frequently controversial. Jones’ work points to a system of periodization that blurs the lines between the colonial and postcolonial eras.

The lines between colonial and postcolonial eras are also blurred in a very different study by postcolonial theorist Nidhi Srinivas focused on Prakash Tandon (1911-2004), the first indigenous chief executive of Lever Brothers India, the subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch MNE Unilever. Srinivas is interested in determining when the culture of the British-controlled Indian subsidiary of this Anglo-Dutch company ceased being colonialist. Unilever grew out of Lever Brothers, a British soap-making company that expanded to many countries, including India, after the 1880s. Manufacturing began in India in 1931. Until the late 1930s, however, its managerial workforce in India was exclusively white and British. Prakash Tandon joined the company as a management-track trainee in 1937. He recalled that when he arrived the other junior executive assumed he was a tea server. Srinivas quotes the sections of Tandon’s autobiography in which Tandon deals with the cultural legacies of Empire and uses this evidence to suggest that the true end of the culture of colonialism in Hindustan Lever came when Tandon, who had come under the growing influence of US managerial ideologies during his time at Harvard Business School, became the chief executive of the company in 1961. For example, Tandon promoted the ideology of scientific management as a way of undercutting colonial-era ethnic hierarchies. In his narrative, 1961, not 1947, the year in which Indian gained independence,is the key temporal marker distinguishing the colonial from the post-colonial era, at least within this firm (Srinivas, 2013). A recent historical study of Unilever in post-Independence India depicts 1956, the year the subsidiary listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange, as marking the effective end of coloniality within that firm (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017).

Andrew Smith’s study of the end of ethnocentric IHRM practices at the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) again shows that this process was very gradual, characterised by resistance from some white executives, and driven by a host of technological and cultural factors that were separate from political decolonization. Indeed Hong Kong, the firm’s most important market in the 1960s, was still a British colony at that time and was expected to remain in British hands into the future. In Smith’s narrative, HSBC’s ethnocentric IHRM strategy was abandoned very gradually and over a long period from the 1950s up to the late 1970s. His paper connects this change to both computerisation in the 1960s and to the marked shift in attitudes towards racial and ethnic discrimination that occurred in the capitalist world in the 1960s, an era in which the Civil Rights Movement made major gains in the United States, raising the global profile of civil rights issues (Smith, 2016).

Broadly similar conclusions about the timing of the abandonment of the IHRM strategy can be derived from the studies of how Barclays DCO responded to decolonization in Africa by Africanising its workforce. Papers by Decker (2005) and Morris (2016) reveal that the firm’s promotion of Black Africans to positions of real authority was not driven by a single decision taken at the firm’s headquarters in response to the imminent end of the British Empire, but was rather the result of a series of piecemeal decisions taken by management throughout the firm at various points from the 1950s to the 1970s. Decker (2010) suggests that the process of Africanisation in the very different political context of South Africa is still an ongoing project. Uche (2012), a study of the indigenisation of foreign (largely British) businesses in Nigeria, suggests that the turning point was in the 1970s, long after Nigeria’s political independence, which was granted in 1960.

Readers should derive one key lesson from our survey of the business-historical research on the evolution on IHRM in the era of decolonization: that there is significant disagreement about when British business in Asia actually ceased to operate in a colonialist-imperialist fashion suggests that the institutional cultures of these firms changed very gradually. This survey provides the context against which we can consider developments at BOC.

## ***Historiography of BOC***

Any researcher studying BOC owes a considerable debt to T.A.B. Corley’s two volume *History of the Burmah Oil Company*, which appeared in 1983 and 1988, at a time when the firm’s identity as a separate organization was ending due to its integration into the BP Group. Professor Corley’s scholarly research into the history of British multinational enterprise was informed by his previous career in banking, which included a period working in the Central Bank of Iraq from 1953 to 1955. Corley’s books thus combined a degree of insider knowledge of the politics of oil with the research methods of a traditional historian. To the extent Corley’s study engaged with theory, it referenced the work of Mark Casson, an economist of international business. Corley’s research questions were, therefore, quite different from ours, which are informed by postcolonial theory.

Corley said relatively little about staffing within the firm. He briefly explained the similarity in background and mentality of the British civil servants who governed India and the top managers of the firm, noting that the senior management cadres, who bore the title ‘executive assistant’ were ‘graduates of British universities [who] were similar in background and in attitude to their British ICS counterparts’ and had been selected, in part, based on their sporting abilities (Corley, 1988, p. 310).

Newer research by Verma and Abdelrehim (2016) is somewhat closer to our approach in that these authors apply postcolonial theory to understanding the development of foreign oil companies in India after 1947. Their paper uses post-colonial theory on hybridity to understand the operations of BOC’s relationship with the government of India after 1947. Abdelrehim et al., (2017) use Durkheimian theory to understand the firm’s painful restructuring in the wake of the 1973 oil shock. This restructuring was supervised by the Bank of England, which supported this iconic British company but with strict conditions designed to limit the firm’s potential burden on the British state. The focus of the aforementioned authors is clearly on the relations between this oil company and national governments rather than the internal life of the firm. In this sense, it is similar to the bulk of the vast literature on the history of the oil industry, which has long been preoccupied with the theme of state-business relations and has paid comparatively little attention to staffing (Jones, 1981; Bradley, 1996; Bud-Frierman, 2010; Bucheli, 2008, 2010; Taylor, 2015). Yergin (2011), a best-selling yet scholarly historical study of the geopolitics of oil, exemplifies this approach. While we certainly understand the reasons why previous historians of the oil industry have focused on the relations between governments and the oil majors, we believe that it is time to build on this research by writing histories of staffing systems in oil companies that draw on postcolonial theory.

# **Overview of company history: the Burmah Oil Company, 1886-2000**

From its inception, Burmah Oil Company’s strategy was closely connected to British military and political power in India. The company was founded in Glasgow in 1886 by David Cargill, a Scottish merchant who had prospected for oil in Upper Burma, a territory that was added to the British Empire that year (Corley, 2006). It should be explained that the oil industry was then barely a quarter of a century old, as the start of modern oil production is conventionally located in Pennsylvania in 1859 (Black, 2014). In 1876, Cargill had bought the Rangoon Oil Company Ltd, a Glasgow firm that had failed in its efforts to exploit oil in Upper Burma due to the actions of the territory’s independent ruler (Corley, 1988). As already noted, the annexation of the territory by the British dramatically changed the prospects of the firm and led to the creation of the Burmah Oil Company in 1886 (Corley, 2006). The BOC grew rapidly, developing oil fields in the Central Burma Basin, building a large refinery, and creating a distribution network to bring lamp oil to consumers throughout India and Burma. The firm also profitably marketed by-products such as wax in Britain (Corley, 1988, p. 2). In 1905, BOC signed a long-term agreement to supply fuel oil to the British navy’s new oil-burning ships (Corley, 1988, p. 2). The BOC’s increasingly close relationship with the British government resulted in BOC’s expansion into oil production in Persia, a nominally independent country over which the British were attempting to exert influence (Corley, 1988, p. 5). In 1909, BOC established a subsidiary called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), which subsequently played an important role in Iranian political history (Marsh, 2007; Vassiliou, 2009; Venn, 2016; Abdelrehim and Toms, 2017).

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In the interwar period, intensifying competition among the major oil producers prompted BOC, to attempt to negotiate a variety of anti-competitive agreements with rival firms such as Shell. In 1928, BOC negotiated the Burmah-Shell agreement, which provided for the establishment of a joint distribution system in India of that name (Corley, 1988, pp. 5-8; Bamberg, 1994, p. 107).

The Second World War produced existential threat to BOC. One of Japan’s motivations for entering the war in December 1941 had been to secure oil supplies (Black, 2014, p.136). Not surprisingly, control of BOC’s Burmese fields was important to both sides in the conflict (Corley, 1988, p. 112). In early 1942, as Japanese forces pushed through Burma, the British military destroyed BOC’s Burmese production facilities so as to deny them to the enemy (Evans, 1946).

In the post-war period, India remained the main source of BOC’s oil net profit contributing 50% in 1949 and 54% in 1955 respectively, despite the coming of Indian independence in 1947. BOC’s focus remained on the Indian subcontinent as late as 1955, with sales of lubricants, wax, and other products in European markets representing a mere ten per cent of revenues, as shown in Figures 6 and 7.

<INSERT Figures 6, 7 ABOUT HERE>

At independence in 1947, foreign firms in India did not know what to expect from the new government (Tyson, 1947). The BOC’s Annual Report for 1948 observed that ‘The constitutional changes in India, Pakistan and Burma have affected all residents in those countries in some degree, and particularly in Burma where our employees have had to live and work in an atmosphere of disturbance and uncertainty’ (BOC Annual Report, 1948, p. 10). In 1948, W.E.V. Abraham, the Managing Director of BOC, travelled to India and Pakistan to try to ascertain the stances of the two governments with respect to foreign enterprises (Abraham, 1948). The initial signals from the Indian government were, however, largely positive. As a 1952 investigation by London’s India, Pakistan and Burma Association reported, T.T. Krishnamachari, the Minister for Commerce and Industry, had declared that the government did not want to take over foreign-owned enterprises. The report also noted that G.L. Mehta, the Indian ambassador to the United States, was in favour of ‘foreign capital … subject to qualifying conditions, and the right to select’. Moreover, C.D. Deshmukh, Minister of Finance, had told his compatriots in the context of oil refineries ‘that there are some things in the world which they cannot expect to get on their own terms’ (India, Pakistan and Burma Association, 1952; Basu, 2001, p. 138). In the period between independence in 1947 and 1956, Nehru’s government sought to remain on good terms with BOC and other foreign oil companies and actively encouraged them to continue investing in India.

In the middle of the 1950s, however, there was an apparent shift in the political climate, for the BOC’s annual report of 1954 reported that: ‘It is becoming increasingly difficult to be sure just how welcome private enterprise is in the India of to-day’ (BOC Annual Report, 1954, pp. 19-20) . Around this time, the rise within the Congress party of Keshav Dev Malaviya, a strident Indian nationalist, threatened the hitherto largely amicable relations between the BOC and Nehru’s government. In 1956, Malaviya established an Oil and Natural Gas Commission to investigate how the government could nurture an India-owned industry using technology supplied by the Soviet bloc (Bamberg, 2000, p. 257; Economist, 1961). In subsequent years, the Indian government began the process of constructing an integrated, Indian-owned oil firm (Verma and Abdelrehim, 2016). In the 1960s, the Indian government began to impose various regulations on Burmah-Shell, which were clearly designed to redistribute market share away from Burmah-Shell towards the Indian government’s own company. The most onerous of these regulations took the form of restrictions on the company’s freedom to import crude oil from its preferred suppliers, thereby reducing the efficiency of its refineries (The Economist, 1970). Other regulations, such as price controls and restrictions on the firm’s ability to hire and fire, also eroded profits (Burmah-Shell, 1974). The rules imposed by the Port of Bombay also hurt the bottom line of the firm, since they prevented the importation of Middle Eastern crude in the most modern ships and also complicated Burmah-Shell’s extensive coastwise trade (Patwardhan, 1974).

Many of these regulations represented a form of ‘creeping nationalisation’ that reduced the efficiency of Burmah-Shell’s refineries and thus the value of the subsidiary to the parent company. The value of BOC’s Indian assets was also likely reduced by the fact that Burmah-Shell’s refining and marketing distribution activities were performed by legally separate firms. Aware of the benefits of full integration, executives sought advice in 1964 from a Bombay law firm about the complex legal and taxation implications of a takeover of Burmah Shell Marketing by Burmah Shell Refinery Ltd (Mehra, 1964; Jones, 1964). However, these firms remained separate entities as late as 1975, as the agreement selling Burmah-Shell to the Indian government shows (Patwardhan, 1975b).

After the oil industry was nationalized in Burma in 1963, BOC encountered an increasingly difficult market with increased government involvement in the activities of the company. The company therefore looked to expand activities in other parts of the world, even as a freshly established government company (later the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, or MOGE) took charge in Burma (Thornton, 2015). In 1957, BOC chairman William Eadie initiated a major change in the strategy of the company that involved shifting away from the politically troubled Indian subcontinent towards more promising markets in the Western Hemisphere (Canada, the United States, Peru, and Ecuador) as well as Australia. The company also acquired two specialist oil refineries in England that allowed it to capitalise on its expertise in lubricants. In 1963, a business journalist observed that the company had evolved into a ‘rather eclectic’ enterprise that included its ‘traditional’ business in India and Pakistan as well as newer ventures in Canada (The Economist, 1963).

In 1966, Burmah Oil merged with Castrol, the United Kingdom’s leading producer of lubricants. The Burmah Group also began investing in North Sea oil production, started acquiring petrol stations in the United Kingdom, and further diversified into the sale of non-petroleum products to motorists (Corley, 1988, p.66; BOC Annual Report for 1966, p.19; BOC Annual Report for 1968, p.12). In 1973, the Burmah Group used loans from a syndicate of banks to acquire Signal Oil and Gas of Houston, a move that was interpreted by contemporaries as a sign that firm was planning to create a vertically-integrated US subsidiary that could challenge the US oil majors in their home market.(Financial Times, 1974) Burmah Group further increased its debt levels in the course of acquiring a large fleet of tankers designed to connect its refinery in the Bahamas with ports in the south-eastern US (Burmah Group Annual Report for 1974, p.5). All of these changes meant that the relative importance of the firm’s operations in India and Pakistan was rapidly declining even before the 1973 oil shock forced the firm to further contract operations on the Indian subcontinent.

The shift in the firm’s strategic focus away from India was accompanied by the grant of much greater autonomy to the firm’s Indian subsidiary. Prior to January 1967, the CEO of the subsidiary, A.J.W.S Leonard, had extremely limited freedom of action, as a wide range of decisions had to be approved by Burmah-Shell’s London Office. In 1967, the London office was closed and this intensive micro-management was replaced by ‘management by exception,’ a system whereby the parent company’s role is reduced to the examination of the main financial and operational results of the subsidiary, only intervening with the subsidiary’s managers when there is a failure to meet targets. In the case of Burmah-Shell, there was, however, an important exclusion to the principle of management by exception, for executives in the UK remained responsible for ‘Personnel matters i.e., Recruitment, Career Planning, Training, Employee Relations, and Services to Personnel” in the “Lettered” or senior manager category. Moreover, these managers retained control of the firm’s on-going efforts to train Indians for technical and managerial posts, doing so via the administration of scholarship schemes for Indian nationals, liaison with Loughborough College and Birmingham University, and maintaining contact with Indian trainees during their time in the UK (BOC, 1966)..

In the early 1970s, the political pressures on Burmah-Shell increased as Indira Gandhi’s government increasingly turned away from the West and towards the Soviet Union. In 1971, the 25th amendment to the Indian constitution was ratified, which removed the requirement that ‘adequate compensation’ be paid to the owners of companies that were nationalized (Anjara, 1975) Burmah-Shell refused to refine shipments of Soviet crude, a decision that offended the Indian authorities. In the face of mounting hostility, Burmah-Shell took actions to generate goodwill in India. The company assisted the Indian government during the 1971 war against Pakistan, supplied technical expertise to a fertiliser production programme, and funded a highly-visible road safety campaign, documenting all of these efforts in a full-colour pamphlet it issued in 1972 (BOC, 1972). In the same year, the BOC appointed M.S. Patwardhan as the Indian subsidiary’s first Indian Chief Executive (Kilbey, 1974). In his autobiography, Patwardhan recalled that ‘virtually the whole of the Management team had Indian nationality’ by the 1970s (Patwardhan, 1986, p.97) and that his appointment was thus the logical outcome of a ‘conscious decision’ made in the post-war period to ‘Indianise the officer cadre progressively … over a number of years (Patwardhan, 1986, p.86, p. 92).

However, the attacks on the firm continued and there were increasingly strident calls in the Indian press and parliament for government ‘participation’ in the ownership of all oil companies. In May 1973, an obviously alarmed Patwardhan cabled Burmah-Shell’s office in Swindon to report that certain ministers in the government had come out in favour of vaguely-defined state participation in the Indian subsidiary of Esso, a US-owned competitor. An executive in Swindon circled the word ‘participation’ and asked for more information over what type of government equity stake that term implied: ‘51%? 60%? 75%? 100%’ (Patwardhan, 1973). On a visit to India in March 1974, a Burmah-Shell executive found that the subsidiary’s top management team, which by then consisted entirely of Indian nationals, was demoralised by the uncertainty over their professional futures. The lack of clarity since the late 1950s over whether foreign oil companies would have a future in India had discouraged a generation of young Indians from joining the firm. The result was that ‘the staff has been aging together while a continuous process of contraction has been going on’. The executive also reported that Burmah-Shell ‘is now down to 3,400 retail sites, 5 main port installations, 160 depots, two lubricating oil blending plants, and a little over 5000 men’ (Trenear-Thomas, 1974).

Unlike Shell, which had engaged in scenario planning related to a possible increase in the world price of oil (Corneluis et al., 2005), the Burmah Oil Group was completely unprepared for the oil shock that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The firm, which had borrowed extensively to finance its expansion spree, found itself unable to service its debts and was financially supported by the Bank of England, which made the appointment as CEO of Alastair Down, the former head of British Petroleum (BP), a condition of continued financial support. Under Down’s leadership, the Burmah Group rationalised its operations and sold off overseas assets so as to focus on the firm’s core competences, which were now clearly in the area of lubricants (McCosh and Earl, 1978). Fortuitously for the company, Down’s drive to sell overseas assets coincided with the agenda of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had decided that India’s oil industry should be under Indian government ownership. This sale took place during the period known as the Emergency (1975-77), when India’s democratic institutions and freedom of the press were temporarily suspended (Guha, 2011).

Correspondence in the BP Archive suggests that the decision by the Indian government to seek 100 per cent of Burmah-Shell’s Indian assets, rather than merely an equity stake, appears to have been taken rather suddenly in October 1975. In the immediate aftermath of Gandhi’s imposition of the Emergency on 26 June 1975, Burmah-Shell executives seem to have been moderately sanguine about the likely impact of the suspension of civil liberties on both India’s economic prospects and the outlook for the firm in 1976. A memorandum prepared in early October remarked that while it was unfortunate that Gandhi had jailed opposition politicians, most Indians supported the Emergency as they prioritized economic growth (Burmah Shell Oil Storage and Distributing Company, 1975). On 7 October 1975, M.S. Patwardhan gave a presentation in Swindon that briefly referenced the on-going partnership negotiations with the Indian government but focused mainly on the firm’s prospect for 1976. He named the pro-business ministers in the government and approvingly noted the Gandhi government’s law and order agenda and observed that Gandhi now ‘frowned upon’ strikes. He also reported that Gandhi was moving to de-regulate parts of the economy by lifting price controls for certain commodities, ‘although not yet oil’. His generally upbeat presentation included a discussion of the likely impact of the recent monsoon season, which had been good, and the ‘mildly Bullish’ view taken by India’s stock exchanges (Patwardhan, 1975a).

The fact that Patwardhan gave such a detailed forecast for 1976 to twelve British colleagues suggests that the executives in Swindon believed that Burmah-Shell would continue to operate in India for at least another year, if not much longer. However, by late October, the company had been plunged into discussions about the complete nationalization of its Indian assets at prices it considered to be unfair. During these acrimonious discussions, the firm enlisted the support of the British High Commissioner and Dutch Ambassador in New Delhi to help secure an improved valuation of its assets. During the negotiations, Burmah-Shell complained that the Indian government’s method of valuing its assets was less generous than that used when the Indian subsidiary of Esso was nationalized. After a compressed period of bargaining, the two parties arrived at an agreement that was tolerable to both (Patwardhan, 1975c). The sale agreement was concluded in November 1975 and by January 1976, most of Burmah-Shell’s Indian assets were in the hands of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited or BPCL (Finlay, 1975 . BOC’s holdings in oil-producing refineries in north-east India were sold to the Indian government in 1981 (The Economist, 1981).

By the early 1980s, therefore, BOC’s operations on the Indian subcontinent were vestigial and relatively unimportant in the overall strategy of the firm. We would note here that while BOC’s subsidiary in Pakistan survived up to the end of the twentieth century, it was a relatively small operation that contributed little to the parent company’s overall revenues. In the period after 1947, references to BOC’s operations in Pakistan appeared considerably less frequently in the firm’s annual reports than did material about the subsidiary in the Republic of India. This pattern suggests that these operations were less important to the parent company. Relatively few primary sources related to BOC in post-1947 Pakistan are available. However, the picture that emerges from the surviving sources suggests that the company’s relationship with the government of Pakistan was more harmonious than its relationship with the Indian governments led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In November 1967, BOC executives made plans to list shares of the Pakistani subsidiary on the Karachi and Dacca stock exchanges, which is a sign that they were confident that Pakistan would remained a vibrantly capitalist economy (Burmah-Shell, Pakistan, 1967).

This confidence is understandable, as Pakistan’s government was more consistently pro-Western and pro-capitalist than that of India during the Cold War. During the brief period in the 1970s when Pakistan was led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the country experimented with socialist economic policies and improved relations with the Soviet Union. For most of its post-Independence history, however, Pakistan welcomed Western firms. Indeed, Bhutto made it clear in 1974 that Western firms were still welcome and would not be nationalised. Pakistan’s largely pro-Western orientation was confirmed in 1977 when conservative military officers overthrew Bhutto in a military coup (Talbot, 2012).. As a result of this relatively favourable political environment, BOC was able to continue operating in Pakistan even as it was forced to wind down its operations in India. Burmah Oil Company Pakistan Ltd continued to trade in Pakistan until 2005, selling lubricants in partnership with Pakistan State Oil (Corley, 1988, p. 329; Burmah Oil of Pakistan, 2004) .

By the 1970s, BOC’s annual reports were referring less and less frequently to the company’s operations on the Indian subcontinent, which were now peripheral to the group. While they report in detail on workforce issues in the UK and other parts of the world, the reports cease to be a source of information about the firm’s workforce in its vestigial Indian operations. BOC ceased to exist as a separate firm in 2000, when, as part of the corporate merger wave the late 1990s (Evenett, 2003), Burmah-Castrol was purchased by BP Amoco, a firm that had been formed recently by the merger of BP and Amoco. The Castrol brand remained in use, but BOC was no longer an independent entity (Grace’s Guide Ltd, 2017). In 2016, just six of BP’s 123 subsidiaries continue to bear the name Burmah Oil (BP plc, 2016, p. 232). None of these subsidiaries has any apparent connection to the Indian subcontinent.

These various developments across the history of the firm were reflected in production figures. Figure 8 shows that BOC crude oil production and refinery throughput increased from 1886 until 1942 when denial took place by the British forces. Following that, from 1943 till 1956, BOC was moving towards the reconstruction of the fields and refineries, and production started to increase gradually up to 1956. Figure 9 illustrates that BOC refinery throughput from Burma exceeded the throughput from India during the period 1929-1961.

<INSERT Figures 8, 11 ABOUT HERE>

# **The changing IHRM strategies of BOC, 1920-1980**

This section discusses how the Burmah Oil Company (along with its associated companies) approached its policy on personnel in the mid-twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the transition between the periods before and after 1947-8, when South Asia was formally decolonised.

A key question regarding personnel in the years after World War I was that of replacing expatriate British staff with local employees. Initially, in this case, that meant Burmese and Indians nationals, and additionally, after independence and partition in 1947, Pakistanis. In interwar India, the debate on appointing more locals, generally referred to by the term ‘Indianization’, was relatively advanced in the context of government services. But pressures for Indianization were not restricted to the government services: it was also an important consideration in private firms, who implemented the policy to varying degrees (Ramnath, 2017; Ramnath, 2016).

How then, did the BOC go about ‘localisation’ in the years after 1947? More generally, how did its work culture and the role envisaged for its expatriate (mostly British) staff evolve as a postcolonial identity began to gain definition in the countries of South Asia?

*Pre-1947*

In the offices, as in the oilfields, the British and American officers formed a numerical minority but had a virtual monopoly of the managerial and expert technical positions. A photograph of the ‘Main Office Staff’ in Yenangyaung (likely dating from the 1930s) shows a row of about thirty white expatriate staff in the front, and some six rows of Burmese and Indians behind them (Bowlby, 1962, photograph adjacent to p. 26, and Appendices).

A defining feature of British oil companies in colonial South Asia was their close association with the colonial state. Their organisation and culture also mirrored those of the colonial government services. Life was centred on townships developed at or near the oilfields, comparable in many ways to the subcontinent’s railway townships (Bear, 1994). These townships were often geographically remote, which inevitably shaped the social life and culture of these expatriate communities. The memoirs of British oilmen in pre-independence Burma give a flavour of the life they led and the work cultures they built and inhabited.

Arriving in 1919 in Rangoon, H.S. Bowlby joined the Burmah Oil Company as Office Assistant, and then rose through the ranks to the post of General Manager. In his 1962 memoirs Bowlby describes how he enjoyed a lifestyle supported by a large number of Indian servants (Bowlby, 1962, p. 3). Inexpensive and plentiful domestic help gave BOC’s expatriates ample free time for such pastimes as tennis, golf, sniping, and polo, aristocratic activities that were considered suitably ‘pukka’ or appropriate to this class (Bowlby, 1962, p. 5). Relations between locals and expatriates were, if not segregated, then certainly hierarchical.

BOC employees were virtually a part of the colonial establishment. As they rose in the ranks, they took on duties outside the company. As General Manager in Rangoon, Bowlby sat on various bodies and meetings, including the Burma Chamber of Commerce, the Burma Railways, the Red Cross, and the Rangoon Golf Club (Bowlby, 1962, p. 28)..

The social clubs in Burma’s oil-producing region were exclusively for the expatriate employees, which parallels the system in colonial Indian settlements (Grindle, 1997b). The Indians and Burmese, on the other hand, lived austere lives. British oil companies in India did provide some housing facilities for the Indian and some Burmese workers, though food and travel were not paid for (Grindle, 1997a, p. 45). In 1938, Indian as well as Burmese workers of the BOC and BBPC in the Chauk oilfield struck work (Grindle, 1997a, p. 71). G.A.F. Grindle, a manager at BBPC, conceded that these workers had legitimate grievances: in addition to the conditions mentioned above, the Indian workers ‘lived in barracks, plain unfurnished quarters of about sixty feet by twenty … None had their families with them and the majority stayed for two or three years before returning to India’. Until the shifts for drilling crews were reduced to eight hours in the late 1930s, the ‘native drilling staff of BOC and BBPC appear to have worked twelve-hour shifts (Grindle, 1997a , p.72). Despite growing pressure for Indianization in the inter-war years, as well as evidence of real progress in Indianization of the Indian civil service, BOC remained entirely ethnocentric in its IHRM practices.

Highly ethnocentric attitudes were revealed in the way in which BOC reported on the casualties suffered by its workforce during the Second World War, when Japanese forces invaded Burma (BOC Annual Reports, 1940s; Corley, 1988), with the firm’s annual reports evincing more concern for the smaller number of British casualties than the much larger number of Burmese and Indian workers who were killed or unaccounted for. For example, the Chairman informed the shareholders of the company in 1942 that ‘It is with great regret that I have to report the addition of a further seven fatal casualties from acts of War to the six intimated last year among our employees. These were again men of U.K. origin, but, with one exception, normally serving with us in the East. Four more of this category have been reported prisoners of War’ (BOC Annual Report for 1942, p.3) . The same report discussed, in passing, the 257 deaths amongst its Indian staff in Burma, as well as noting that almost all its Burmese staff had remained in that country, where ‘we have no news of their welfare’ (BOC Annual Report for 1942, p.3).

*1947 and beyond*

After 1945, as operations recommenced in both India and Burma, staff were again thanked for their unstinting efforts, not least as ‘especially where they have had to start rebuilding on the ruins of our former properties in Burma conditions have been far from easy” (BOC Annual Report for 1946, p. 8). In the BOC annual report for 1946, which was published when Indian independence was imminent, the chairman of the board claimed that the firm had long favoured independence for India. The report declared that the company’s ‘unshaken confidence … in the future of Burma and India and in a square deal – not least for those like ourselves who have served them in the past efficiently and well in their nation building efforts – has been appreciatively commented on in these countries’ (BOC Annual Report for 1946, pp.7-8). He also declared that ‘this attitude of ours is merely one expression of the good will and good wishes felt generally here for peoples with whom we have lived for so long not in the manner of conquerors but as friends’. The chairman reported that like others in Britain, the company were ‘happy that’ these countries ‘have now achieved that democratic manhood and complete independence which is our own heritage and which has been our long wished gift for them’ (BOC Annual Report for 1946, pp.7-8).

Thus, as the company began to look to a post-colonial future, it also attempted to recast its own colonial past as one in which it had played the role of friend and partner. The past was not to be easily thrown off however. The annual report of 1947 welcomed independence for Burma, India and Pakistan, noting how ‘To all three countries we wish peace and progress in the evolution of their new independence’, but also acknowledged the terrible violence that had accompanied partition. Nonetheless, ‘It has been a matter for relief and satisfaction that our staff, British and Asiatic, all came through safely’ (BOC Annual Report for 1947, pp. 5-8). Though perhaps unconscious the language used here – particularly in the epithet ‘Asiatic’ – bears the unmistakeable hallmarks of a colonial mind-set.

However, despite the relatively optimistic tone set in 1946 and 1947, by 1955 the BOC Chairman was wondering ‘what room there will be for foreign capital and *expertise* in the Petroleum Industry’ of India (BOC Annual Report for 1955, p. 19). Possibly the management was anxious that they would not be allowed to employ as many expatriates in specialist and supervisory positions as had been their normal practice. Nonetheless, it was clear that some localisation was necessary, and ‘Asianisation programmes’ were inaugurated to train local employees for other than blue-collar positions (BOC Annual Report for 1955, p. 24).

A company brochure reported that as of 1955, Burmah-Shell had 15,364 employees in India, of whom 1,217 were in “Supervisory” positions. It is not clear what fraction of these 1,217 white-collar employees were Indians, but some institutional efforts were being made to enable localisation. The company had staff training centres in the four metropolitan cities where it had its branch offices. One of them, in Bombay, was residential, and catered to Burmah-Shell staff and those of ‘associated companies in other countries’. Some of the Indian staff were sent for ‘special courses in the U.K’. The company also sponsored a number of scholarships for Indian students of mechanical engineering who wished to study at Loughborough and Birmingham, two universities in the UK (Background to Burmah-Shell, 1956; Malcolm, 1966). There was indeed a conscious ‘policy’ which dictated that ‘[w]hen operating and trading in overseas territories we employ nationals where possible’ (BOC Annual Report for 1957, p. 23).

The company’s annual reports in the late 1950s and early 1960s contain frequent references to progress on Indianization. Occasionally, though, there was a hint of reluctance. . Locals would replace expatriate employees ‘as and when suitable men [became] available’, but there was a potential trade-off: ‘difficulties are encountered in certain cases when we are expected to accelerate matters to an extent which would prove detrimental to efficiency’The company would probably not, of its own accord, have pursued localisation at the same pace; the impetus was external. Tellingly, they reported that their localisation drive was able to ‘[meet] the full requirements of the respective governments’. There was also a need to mollify potentially sceptical shareholders and the company reported that its ‘confidence in’ the emerging (Asian) white-collar staff ‘[had] been fully justified’ (BOC Annual Report for 1959, p. 24).. Still, there were limits to how high an Asian employee could rise, even in his own country. As of 1970, not a single Asian name appeared among the Divisional Directors and Chief Representatives of the company and its subsidiaries anywhere in the world. The Chief Representatives for India, Pakistan and ‘South-East Asia and the Far East’ (J.C. Finlay, M.C.; K.F.D. Wilson; V.W. Good) appear to have been Britons (BOC Annual Report for 1970, p. 44).

There was, of course, another side to the human resource practices of the BOC and its South Asian subsidiaries. This was their policy with respect to the Overseas (i.e. British) staff who continued to go out to these countries, and the work culture they were socialised into. Whether or not these men had the swagger of their colonial predecessors, there were elements of continuity in the way they approached their jobs abroad. Company instructions to Britons newly recruited to the Overseas Service as of c. 1961 continued to use the diffuse term ‘the East’ to refer to India, West and East Pakistan, and Burma (Burmah Oil Company, 1961). ‘The East’ was still presented in somewhat Orientalist terms. New recruits were advised to secure the required ‘kit’ for their time there (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 19), and to prepare for the weather thus: ‘You will have to think in terms of “cold, hot, wet”, rather than “spring, summer, winter”’ (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 23). Other colonial-era traditions continued. Expatriates received a special addition to their pay called ‘Overseas Differential’ (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 7); their conditions of service included various clauses about ‘passages’ back to the UK (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 9) ; employees on ‘local leave’ could travel at the company’s expense to the ‘nearest approved hill-station’ (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 11).The old lifestyle had, of course, to be tempered in some ways: recruits were warned that ‘regulations about the carrying and possession of fire-arms in the East are usually very strict. If you intend to take a gun with you, you must ensure that these regulations are known to you and obeyed’ (Burmah Oil Company, 1961, p. 25).

*Pre and post nationalization*

The final period to consider is that immediately before and after the company was nationalized by the Indian government in 1976. Did this event lead to an accelerated programme of ‘Indianization’, suggesting that the slow progress hitherto made was largely rooted in company culture and a persistent colonial mind-set? In fact, the process of Indianization can be considered substantially completed by 1976. The most significant marker was the appointment of M.S. Patwardhan as the company’s first Indian Chief Executive in 1972.

Nonetheless, Indianization was about more than mere headcounts, as attitudes were also manifested in less quantifiable ways. For example, even as lower managerial levels were progressively Indianized in the 1950s, social segregation along effectively racial lines, manifested in features such as separate toilets and dining facilities for members of the company’s nationwide and regional cadres, persisted. It was only from the late 1950s that a more unified or unitary managerial cadre, stratified by role hierarchy, began to emerge (Patwardhan, 1986, p. 90). Moreover, the type of Indian picked for inclusion in the managerial cadre reflected a strong desire to hire highly Anglicized Indians. Patwardhan’s testimony suggests that the BOC, in recruiting Indians, had traditionally preferred candidates who at least somewhat fitted the model of a ‘clubbable’ young Englishman; literally a ‘club-going Indian with an interest in and preferably aptitude for outdoor sports. If he had an English education, so much the better since his thought processes would follow familiar patterns, communication would be simpler and mutual trust more quickly established’. Indian managers, particularly at the All-India Assistant level, had to conform to a model based on the ‘expatriate majority’ (Patwardhan, 1986, p. 87). The persistence of colonial-era status hierarchies within BOC also manifested themselves in subtle ways, particularly when British and Indian executives socialized. For instance, Patwardhan recalled in 1991 a dinner party in the 1960s when it had been assumed that the British individual was the guest of honour and was thus entitled to eat first (Patwardhan, 1991, p. 39). In our view, the changes that had been made did not necessarily leave the firm well prepared for the challenges of the 1970s, including the threat of nationalization.

# **Analysis: The persistence of coloniality**

The process of Indianization at BOC was slow and halting. The company’s move away from an ethnocentric IHRM strategy towards a polycentric one was extremely gradual, never entirely complete, and, apparently, grudging. To the extent that BOC began to fill senior technical and managerial posts with Indians, this decision was significantly motivated by the desire to placate India’s nationalist government rather than some other consideration, such as an appreciation of the improving quality of Indian engineering and management graduates. Moreover, while the firm moved in the direction of the polycentric IHRM strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, none of the changes in its staffing policy suggest that it considered adopting anything resembling a geocentric IHRM strategy and senior posts in the Indian subsidiary were held by white British expatriates as late as the early 1970s. In contrast, Unilever India’s subsidiary had an Indian CEO, Prakash Tandon, as early as 1961. Postcolonial theory would attribute the fact that BOC was slow to abandon the ethnocentric IHRM model to the persistence of colonialist modes of thought in the cultures of the firm.

We also show that BOC’s relations with the Indian government deteriorated steadily, a process that culminated with the nationalization of its main assets in 1976. From the late 1950s onwards, the firm was attacked by nationalist politicians in India as a relic of oppressive British colonial rule. This pattern raises the counterfactual question of whether BOC could have prevented the deterioration of its relationship with the Indian government – and eventual nationalization – had it moved more swiftly after 1947 to replace its ethnocentric IHRM system with one more functional in the new political environment?

Providing a conclusive answer to this question is difficult, especially in light of the fact that several non-British multinationals, including Coca-Cola and two US oil companies, were also pushed out of India by the government (Patwardhan, 1986, p. 84; Gopinath & Prasad, 2013). Nonetheless, promoting Indians to high- visibility posts in the company would likely have helped to improve relations with the Indian government. BOC seems to have been aware of this possibility, for Patwardhan testifies that it was believed that a policy of progressive Indianization, ‘culminating in the appointment of an Indian Chief Executive’, could ‘help to break the log-jam and start an easier relationship, leading eventually to a mutually beneficial partnership’ with the Indian Government. Indeed, when appointed Chief Executive in 1972, Patwardhan himself ‘saw one of his principal tasks as being the reconciliation of company objectives with national goals’ (Patwardhan, 1986, p. 82). Reflecting in 1991 on why Burmah-Shell had been unable to escape nationalization in 1976, he observed that the ‘step of appointing an Indian Chief Executive’ in 1972 had ‘by itself proved to be inadequate for ensuring Burmah-Shell’s survival’. He speculated that ‘possibly both parties were the prisoners of the historical evolution of their relationship and the change in personalities came too late to turn the clock back’ (Patwardhan, 1991, p. 71).

We therefore face the question why BOC did not Indianise Burmah-Shell’s senior management team at an earlier time. As we have argued, postcolonial theory would suggest that it would have been difficult for the individuals who were making strategy at this firm to have conceptualised, let alone implemented, such a strategy for rapid change after 1947 because they were embedded in a culture that remained deeply colonialist in its attitudes towards individuals from the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the non-Western world. However, we have to be cautious in making this argument. Executives in Unilever’s global headquarters, who were British and Dutch individuals with cultural backgrounds similar to those of the BOC’s leaders, were able to promote Indians to positions of authority in their Indian subsidiary in a swifter fashion, the process being essentially complete with the appointment of Prakash Tandon as chief executive in 1961. The precise reasons for why BOC was slower to accomplish the same transition remain unclear and may have related to some feature of their respective industries, oil versus branded consumer goods, or to subtle differences in mind-set and organizational culture between BOC and Unilever executives.

We would suggest that another possible part of the explanation for why BOC was relatively slow to Indianise its senior management team relates to the dearth of Indians who were qualified to assume technical and managerial positions in its marketing and, *a fortiori*, refining subsidiaries. As we show above, by the late 1960s BOC was investing extensively in an effort designed to remedy this problem. This investment certainly did not take the form of a positive discrimination programme to put Indian nationals into positions before they were qualified. Instead, it involved a somewhat slower process that involved paying for the training in the UK of promising Indian nationals, who would then be qualified to take over senior roles. As we have mentioned, this training was done at company expense at the universities of Birmingham and Loughborough. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say it may have been advisable for the BOC to have begun investing in such training efforts at an earlier date, perhaps when Indian independence was imminent. However, we cannot conclusively determine whether the more rapid Indianization of the firm after 1947 would have improved relations with the Indian government enough to have prevented nationalisation, the ultimate fate of BOC’s Indian subsidiaries. Moreover, the available primary sources do not allow us to determine whether any features of BOC’s organisational culture contributed to the relative slowness with which Indian executives and technicians were trained so that they could replace British personnel.

As this paper has argued, multinational firms such as BOC make strategy in a cultural context that includes the legacies of empire. The so-called cultural or linguistic turn in business history in recent years has led to a greater emphasis on language, representations, and meaning (Rowlinson and Delahaye, 2009). Annual reports can be considered a genre and those published by the BOC certainly displayed distinct and consistent stylistic elements. Those of the 1940s and 1950s in particular were marked by a ‘clubbability’ that would have felt familiar to and reflected the culture of the majority of the senior management and, most probably, many of the shareholders. Moreover, the language deployed in the annual reports displays the clear persistence of a degree of coloniality within the culture and practices of the BOC. Categorisations of staff were made along blunt racial lines that collapsed all non-UK employees into a single category containing a very wide range of nationalities and ethnicities. Striking in the annual reports is the longevity of such terms as ‘the East’, ‘Asian’, ‘Asianisation’, and, most unsettling, ‘Asiatic’. Similarly, when the 1956 annual report commented that ‘[t]he East is no longer “unchanging’’ it was playing on very old Orientalist tropes that saw ‘the East’ as mysterious, backward, and constrained by inflexible conservatism, in contrast to the modernity and innovativeness of the West (BOC Annual Report for 1956, p. 21). The language of the reports carries out, then, a kind of ‘othering’ of indigenous employees. Whether conscious or not, this language was not incidental but rather betrayed assumptions and stereotypes held by the firm’s management: assumptions and stereotypes that were in turn reflected in the persistence of stratified, hierarchical staffing practices that were as slow to disappear as the language used. Meanwhile, Patwardhan, the company’s first Indian Chief Executive, admits that some individuals within the firm ‘might be suspected by an unsympathetic observer to have suffered from delusions of imperial superiority’. In the end, he concludes, by ‘history, Burmah-Shell was a somewhat inward-looking society and natural shyness and reserve were often confused by outsiders with arrogance’ (Patwardhan 1986, p. 84, p. 78). It appears that in the case of this firm, at least, the persistence of colonial-era attitudes was reinforced by organizational insularity. Coloniality is not then either present or not present in the multinational firms of any given colonial or Imperial nation. Rather we have to attend to the histories of the cultures of both home nations and individual firms.

If this reading of the evidence is correct, we could conclude that the firm’s managers were prisoners of the colonialist cultural environment in which they had matured and that their unwillingness to move swiftly to replace its ethnocentric IHRM system with one that was more appropriate ultimately impacted the firm’s bottom line. BOC’s Indian operations were hampered by a series of regulations that the increasingly hostile Indian government imposed in the 1960s. These regulations, which were clearly designed to redistribute market share away from Burmah-Shell towards the Indian government’s own company, represent a form of ‘creeping nationalisation’ that reduced the value of BOC’s Indian subsidiary. This course of action culminated with the coerced sale of the Indian subsidiary to the Indian government in 1976. Quantifying the cost to BOC’s shareholders of the ethnocentric staffing policies pursued by BOC executives after 1947 is difficult, since it is unclear to what extent the discounted price paid by the Indian government in 1976 reflected Indian government dissatisfaction with the slow pace of Indianization at BOC as opposed to the government’s other reasons for resenting the firm.

Readers who are familiar with the principal-agent problem might be inclined to suspect that the slowness with which BOC localized its Indian management team was connected to the personal self-interest of the white British managers who had previously dominated managerial posts in BOC’s Indian subsidiaries. However, our review of the relevant material in the BP Archive did not turn up any evidence that BOC's white British managers resisted instructions to Indianise that had emanated from BOC’s headquarters in the UK. While agency theory may indeed be helpful in explaining why other European multinationals were slow to hire and promote local managers following decolonization, this dynamic does not appear to have been at work in this firm.

# **Conclusions**

This study has demonstrated that the process of Indianization was gradual and undertaken by the BOC in the face of considerable political pressure from the Government of India. Although some efforts were made to train Indians and put them into positions of authority and expertise, this process appears to have been slower than in Hindustan Lever, Unilever’s Indian subsidiary. BOC’s Indian operations continued to operate using an ethnocentric IHRM strategy until the 1970s, the last decade of the subsidiary’s existence. While the ultimate source of BOC’s greater cultural and institutional rigidity as compared to Unilever is not clear to us, we are reasonably certain that the slow pace of Indianization in its Indian subsidiary contributed to the hostility of the Indian government, which was evident in the creeping nationalization of the 1960s and then outright nationalization in 1976.

Our paper points to directions for future research. As noted above, the response of Western multinationals to the Indian government’s demands for Indianization varied considerably, with Unilever completing the process at a relatively early date, and BOC being a relative laggard. We acknowledge that we do not know the precise reasons for the greater institutional rigidity of BOC, but future research projects comparing how a number of multinationals changed in their IHRM systems in the decades after 1945 might shed light on this subject. The cultural turn in business history has also prompted an interest in the experiential dimensions of business life and culture in the past and it would certainly be interesting to track the extent to which the linguistic conventions displayed in the BOC annual reports were merely habitual or did in fact reflect the reality of working for the company, for all grades of staff and all nationalities. How did it feel to be an Indian engineer or junior executive enmeshed within an ethnocentric culture? Did staff variously feel emotions of superiority or of inferiority, of power or powerlessness? Biographies and memoirs give some access to the voice of the white expatriate manager, but the so-called subaltern voice is largely lost. More research to answer these questions is required.

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