

Chutney Men, Moral Panics and White Australia¹

February 2025

In 1891 Adam Mahomed, John Silva and Agnes Fleming were raided by police on the basis of 'numerous complaints that the house (in which they lived) ... was the nightly haunt of Indians and abandoned women who resorted thither to spend their nights in drunkenness and debauchery.'²

On entering the building, the police 'discovered, amid general filth, a quantity of bottles of chutney sauce, the corks of which were flying in all directions, exposing the contents in a state of advanced decomposition. Mahomed said that he sold this stuff while the corks remained in the bottles and thus earned his living.' Mohamed was a hawker – a travelling salesman – as were many other Indians, Afghans and Syrians in the late 1800s and early 1900s in Australia. His stock in trade was chutney.

This court proceedings reads like a straightforward, if colourful, report of 'immoral behaviour' and a want of hygiene in preparation of food being commercially peddled. It is much more. It was held in a racialized context.

Indians had been in Australia since the early days of colonisation. They came as servants and cooks to ex-British military and private citizens; transported as convicts from British India; entrepreneurs/small traders; labourers; and indentured workers.³ By 1891 there were 5,237 Indian residents in Australia, mostly working as cameleers, hawkers, farmers and labourers.'⁴

But in the 1890s and early 1900s Indians fell foul of the racially motivated public outcry at the 'Asiatic migrant' threat to Australian women, workers, shopkeepers, public health and ultimately the identity of Australia itself. This had its legal expression in the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act* and the start of the White Australia policy.⁵ The main target of the Act was Chinese but migration from any Asiatic country, including India, was also affected.⁶

... the perceived problem of unchecked colored immigration and of the "hawker nuisance" became conflated in the white settler imagination.⁷

Now, with the Chinese, and Afghans, and Indians the Caucasian is quite 'played out,' and there are frequently very ugly 'visions about ' in the shape of cowardly Indians who terrify European women and children during the absence of the husbands and fathers. An old English hawker who has been driven out of the trade, speaking to a Times representative said : — ' I

¹ This article is informed by and draws on: Rhook, Nadia, "Turban-clad" British Subjects. Tracking the Circuits of Mobility, Visibility, and Sexuality in Settler Nation-Making. *Transfers* 5(3), Winter 2015; Maclean, Kama, *British India, White Australia. Overseas Indians, intercolonial relations and the empire*. UNSW Press 2020

² The Age 8 Oct 1891 p.6

³ Goodall, Heather, Ghosh, Devleena & Todd, Lindi R., *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol. 3 No 1, February 2008 pp. 49 - 50

⁴ Maclean, Kama, *British India, White Australia. Overseas Indians, intercolonial relations and the empire*. UNSW Press 2020 p.10

⁵ 'The Act gave immigration officers the power to make any non-European migrant sit a 50-word dictation test. This was initially given in any European language, and after 1905 in any prescribed language. As the language chosen for the dictation test was at the discretion of the immigration officer, it was easy to ensure failure for migrants deemed undesirable, either because of their country of origin, possible criminal record, medical history, or if considered morally unfit. Extremely small numbers of non-white migrants were ever allowed to pass. The test was administered 1,359 times prior to 1909, with only 52 people granted entry to Australia. After 1909 not a single migrant made to sit the test passed.' National Museum of Australia.

⁶ 'India-born Community Information Summary', *Department of Home Affairs* 2016

⁷ Rhook, Nadia, "Turban-clad" British Subjects. Tracking the Circuits of Mobility, Visibility, and Sexuality in Settler Nation-Making. *Transfers* 5(3), Winter 2015 p.105

don't know what the white people have been thinking of all these years. While they have been asleep the aliens have gradually worked themselves in till now they compete with white folk at every turn, and they will STARVE THE WHITES TO DEATH if they don't soon take action. ... If the present opportunity is lost the country may as well be given up to the Eastern barbarians. We may as well be in danger of invasion from outside, because of our exclusive action, as live in daily and more sinister danger from inside because of their unrestricted presence.⁸

The hawker and the colonial woman

'... the moral panics generated about protecting the sexual and financial economics of the early Federation family, locate the peripatetic Indian hawker as a central figure.'⁹

'The sight of a turbaned hawker walking along a public road reminded white settlers of the unchecked movement of Indian men toward white women's bodies.'¹⁰

News reports on Indian hawkers take almost salacious glee at reporting the behaviour of the hawkers toward Australian women, particularly where physical violence or threat of it can be reported.

The foreign hawker nuisance is assuming serious dimensions here again. Yesterday an Assyrian called at the house of Cr. Holwell vending his goods but being informed by Miss Beatrice Holwell that nothing was wanted, went away. A little later he returned, and went to the back of the premises, but on Miss Holwell again informing him that nothing was wanted he became enraged and slapped her in the face and caught hold of her by the wrist, and otherwise roughly handled her. The young lady, who had just recovered from a serious illness, was alone at the time, and was greatly frightened and to-day is very ill suffering from nervous shock and hysteria. Constable James was informed of the matter, but no arrest has yet been made.¹¹

That last sentence is telling, as is the denouement of this next instance.

Hawkers were required to be annually licensed. This gave those antipathetic to the hawkers a site at which to enact prejudice, though it didn't always go their way.

Yesterday Mr. Dobbin, P.M., sat in the District Court to deal with a number of adjourned applications for renewals of licenses by Hindoos, Syrians, and Chinese. Against one of the first-named class it was urged that while in the Lilydale district lately he had behaved in an insulting manner towards two daughters of a local resident whilst they were alone in their home. It was alleged that the Hindoo forced his way into the house and refused to leave unless the girls bought something from him, his conduct being of a generally objectionable nature. He was subsequently charged with assault before the Lilydale Court, where he pleaded that he was owed money by the occupants of the house, and simply called there to demand payment. The Bench discharged him. A report of the occurrence was received by Mr. Dobbin yesterday. Senior - constable Nolan, of Lilydale, adding a memo to the document to the effect that personally he believed the story told by the Hindoo. Mr. Dobbin thereupon granted the renewal applied for.¹²

⁸ Sunday Times 2 September 1895 p.1

⁹ Maclean, Kama, *British India, White Australia. Overseas Indians, intercolonial relations and the empire*. UNSW Press 2020 p.75

¹⁰ Rhook, Nadia, "Turban-clad" British Subjects. Tracking the Circuits of Mobility, Visibility, and Sexuality in Settler Nation-Making. *Transfers* 5(3), Winter 2015 p.105

¹¹ 'The Indian Hawker Menace', *The Age* 10 March 1894 p.9

¹² 'Indian Hawkets', *The Argus* (Melbourne) 20 December 1899 p.4

I am not saying that there were not instances of intimidation by Indian hawkers. I am saying that on investigation some reveal racism.

The greatest fear was that association between the hawker and the white woman would lead to debasement of the woman. In 1892 during a case brought against Sarah Williams (or Thirgood) that she could not support her child, it was disclosed that she was sharing a house with four 'chutney men', who it was alleged 'slept on the floor'. Williams did not deny that she was living with the men leading Magistrate Johnson to say 'It's scandalous for you to admit it. You must be very degraded to go and herd with these men.'¹³

This is even more extraordinary, hinting at women's sexual desire for the hawker.

And the housewife of the bush does she not know him? And do not unholy thoughts fill her mind as he slinks subserviently into the yard his snaky eyes roving around and noting everything. Should there be no male about the premises, (and he is quick to detect this) his manner at once changes, the cringing servility disappears, and in the language of scripture, he adds a cubit to his stature. He becomes familiar, free and easy, playful and should the feminine contingent be particularly weak minded he does not hesitate to attempt intimidation?¹⁴

The safety of children was also used to attack the Indian hawker. One newspaper report in 1891 stated 'On entering the door we found a woman and two young girls lying naked behind the door on some bags. The youngest of the girls was suffering from chickenpox and was covered with ulcers.'¹⁵ This is not to deny the severity of a small child with chicken pox, but it is a piece with other sensationalist reporting aimed at getting the white settler to the task of helping to create a white nation.

The hawker, white workers and white shopkeepers

The term Asiatic (which include Chinese, Japanese and Indians) had become synonymous with a willingness to work for low rates of pay, undermining one of the pillars of the Australian settlement as a protected environment for white workers.¹⁶

'The question is whether Europeans shall continue to earn their livelihood by the trade they have established or allow it to be taken from them by a people of commercial instincts who can live on a tenth part of the sum required by a European for his maintenance, and who, whatever their calling in Australia might be, would not cease their connection with their own country'.¹⁷

Bills were proposed and some enacted to license hawkers and pedlars whose trade 'entails upon the fair trader and shopman much detriment to his business from the competition being naturally against him'.¹⁸ Two examples from New South Wales are characteristic as are the racist commentary

¹³ 'Out of the Depths,' *Evening News* (Sydney) 2 July 1892 p.6

¹⁴ 'The Indian Hawker', *Alexandra and Yea Stanford, Gobur, Thornton, and Acheron Express* 13 May 1898 p.3

¹⁵ 'Indian Hawkers. Condiment Consumers. A Public Danger. *The Australian Star* (Sydney) 5 February 1891 p.6

¹⁶ Maclean, Kama, *British India, White Australia. Overseas Indians, intercolonial relations and the empire.* UNSW Press 2020 p.23

¹⁷ 'Indian Hawkers' *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) 23 January 1891 p.4

¹⁸ 'Hawker's Bill' *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* (Sydney) 28 June 1834 p.2 accessed at [28 Jun 1834 – HAWKETR'S BILL - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](https://nla.gov.au/nla:gov.au)

on them from correspondents to newspapers. In 1847 the *Hawkers and Pedlars Regulation Bill* was put before the New South Wales Parliament to bring in a licensing system for hawkers, pedlars and carriers. A commentator in the press objected to it on the grounds that licensing hawkers, pedlars and carriers would 'subject the regular traders, the payers of rents and taxes, to an unfair competition at their own doors' and also 'occasion extreme annoyance and injury to the inhabitants generally from the frequent incursions and depredations which these parties would be enabled to make upon their premises under cover of offering their wares for sale.'¹⁹ These views were also those held and promulgated by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian*.²⁰ The Bill was passed and became law in 1849.²¹

The second was in 1894: the *Hawkers, Peddlers and Carriers Regulation Bill*. A supporter of the Bill wrote to the *Australian* enthusing that 'The bill', which was simply increasing the licence fee, 'will provide distinctly that these persons (Asiatics) shall not get licenses. A general licence fee of 2s 6d a year will be imposed on all carriers for the privilege of being protected from the alien competition. The bill will do away with the chutney, sweetmeat and other hawkers, and also with the camel drivers. At the same time, it is claimed it will overcome the difficulty with respect to camel driving, as while the Afghan drivers will be prevented from working them there will be nothing to prevent the white men from utilising the animal.'²² The Bill failed.

The hawker and their housing

Their living conditions were another place of attack, usually about what was perceived by settlers as over-crowding.

The Carlton police have reported on the condition of the houses, occupied by the Indian hawkers in Argyle Square. They found the houses to be in a terribly filthy and over-crowded condition. In a small three-roomed house, which was visited last night, no less than 30 Indians were found lying huddled together asleep. In another small house 20 Indians were found lying asleep in the clothes they had worn during the day.²³

In another case the premises were 'so overcrowded as to be prejudicial to the health of the inmates employed therein, contrary to the Act.'²⁴ In defence of the hawkers J. H. Richard, Indian interpreter, informed the Bench that the Indian hawkers only came to town twice a year— once to get their licenses and once to attend the great festival (Ramzaam) at the later end of March. When in town they made it a custom to live together.²⁵

The hawker and public health

The language of racism was often cloaked in concern for the safety of the public. 'There have recently been made certain disgusting revelations of how the vegetables vended by Chinese are stored when not disposed of. pending further patient efforts to accomplish a deal. Before that there were no end of revelations about where and how sauce and chutney are made by turbaned exiles and strangers among us ... If there is any branch of trade that calls for thorough and general regulation. which It, doesn't get, that is the producing and vending of food-stuffs specially capable of

¹⁹ 'Hawkers and Pedlars' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney) 17 August 1847 p.2

²⁰ 'Hawkers and Pedlars' *Port Phillip Gazette and Settler's Journal* (Victoria) 4 September 1847 p.2

²¹ Hawkers and Pedlars Act 1849 No 36a, Austlii Hawkers and Pedlars Act 1849 No 36a (austlii.edu.au)

²² 'Alien Hawkers', *The Australian Star* (Sydney) 24 November 1893 p.4

²³ 'Indian Hawkers. Huddled in Filth', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane) 14c December 1892 p.4

²⁴ 'Indian Hawkers. How They Live. A Warning', *The Herald* (Melbourne) 30 January 1893 p.2

²⁵ 'Indian Hawkers. How They Live. A Warning', *The Herald* (Melbourne) 30 January 1893 p.2

deterioration, or filthy manufacture or handling, and likely to become a means of causing disease.’²⁶ The writer believes that the existing regulations on the adulteration of food are not being used effectively ‘and there are undoubtedly thousands of persons moving about the city and country as salesmen who ought to be doing long terms in the gaols of one or the other for their past successes in that line.’

At its worst it painted the hawkers as disease vectors. In 1900, *The Australian Star* ran perhaps the most preposterous story linking the chutney men and their chutney making environment to plague.

‘There is a class of Indians whose presence is a great menace to health. They are engaged in the manufacture of certain condiments. ... Vegetables used in the manufacture of condiments are allowed to lie in back yards rotting in the sun. Rats are attracted to these tenements, and swarm in them. ... Overcrowding in houses in India was found to be the fruitful source of spreading contagion, and if the plague gets a hold here it will be seen that many deaths will result from the same cause.’²⁷

I found no record of any actions taken by health authorities on the basis of these alleged conditions under which chutney was made. The only case of adulteration I found was perpetrated by a white settler turned hawker who was charged with adding salicylic acid to his chutney as a preservative.²⁸

The hawker and the political project of white Australia

Correspondents made distinctions among ‘colored aliens’. ‘But the Chinaman, whatever may be said against him is the superior of the kanaka, and of that type of Indian that hawks chutney and embroidery, and of the Lascar and the African negro, and the lower rank Portuguese and Italian, the West Indian native, and a hundred others, all whom, in our opinion, come under the heading of ‘colored aliens.’²⁹

In an uncanny precursor to the White Australian policy ‘the Premier has issued instructions to the police and magistrates attend the sittings of the licensing court to be held in Melbourne next December, when licenses have to be renewed, with the view of seeing that only those hawkers who are conversant with the English language, and who seem to be desirable men, receive licences.’³⁰

Racism wasn’t limited to the chutney men. This racism was part of the broader white nationalist agenda. In an article in the *Newcastle Herald* in 1897 *The Racial Future* a correspondent writes:

The Indian discovered a long time ago that a cooler and more profitable living could be got by hawking alleged silk handkerchiefs and insecure walking sticks in Australian streets than stewing in the stokeholes of ocean steamers. The Syrian and Armenian, fleeing from Turkish rapacity, have successfully endeavoured to earn a livelihood in these lands by hawking doubtful chutneys and mysterious sauces suggestive of bullock's liver.³¹

It would, however, be a sorry day for the European population if they became outnumbered by Asiatics, even though the dark-visaged strangers should claim the right of British subjects to freely

²⁶ ‘Notes of the Day (by Outis)’, *The Daily Telegraph* (Melbourne) 7 August 1895 p.5

²⁷ ‘Indians and the Bubonic Plague’, *The Australian Star* (Sydney) 16b March 1900 p.5

²⁸ ‘Poisoning the People’, *Truth* (Brisbane) 22 July 1906 p.6

²⁹ ‘Colored Aliens’, *National Advocate* (Bathurst) 22 October 1892 p.2

³⁰ ‘The Indian Hawker Nuisance’, *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 19 September 1893 p.4

³¹ ‘The Racial Future’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW) 29 June 1897 p.4

remove from their own part of the Empire to another. A more preferable fate for Australians than to be overborne by Asiatic hordes would be to be swamped by aliens from Europe.³²

The hawker and chutney

Where threats to women conflated sex and whiteness, attacks on chutney similarly were coded attacks on Asiatics.

In 1886 the Brisbane Courier carried an article reprinted from the *Sydney Telegraph* headed 'Adulteration of Food and Drink written By a Victim.'

'As to sauces, 'the so-called Chutney sold as Indian, it is to be feared, are a sad conglomeration of nastiness. Rotten apples, peaches, pineapples, faulty dried fruits, such as apricots, were all pressed into the service, a little garlic or vinegar is added, and the sauce is ready. For other makes, decomposed horses' and bullocks' liver, boiled down with spices, but still full of unwholesome impurities, are used to no small extent.'³³

The language here is telling of the conflation of racism and health. It isn't too hard or too much of a stretch to see the epithets 'nastiness', 'rotten', 'unwholesome impurities' giving an excuse to say what they wanted to say about the person by saying it about their product

And yet there was a substantial trade in chutney from India. Distance and not being aware of how it was produced apparently made it safe to consume.

'Chutney seller' was used as an insult to hurl at others. '...when defendant insulted me said 'she ought to be in Sydney selling chutney'.³⁴

In 1895 a report on a murder purportedly by 'Afghans or Indians' the extraneous detail is given that in their tent was 'a wicker basket with holes in it for holding bottles similar to that used by hawkers of chutney.'³⁵

Settler attacks on Indian hawkers

The violent side of settler racism was attacks on hawkers.

Indian Hawker Murder.

The inquest concerning the murder of the Indian Hawer Ali Khan, was concluded at Boggabri on Saturday. The jury, after a brief consideration, found a verdict of wilful murder against William and Frederick Dederer, who were committed for trial at Tamworth. The accused received the verdict very calmly and displayed no emotion.³⁶

Murder of an Indian Hawker

Sydney, Sunday.— The inquest regarding the death of the Indian Hawker Nana Ali Khan, was concluded yesterday. There were no farther, sensational developments. The Jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against the cousins, Frederick and William Dederer. The two were accordingly committed for trial.³⁷

³² 'The Racial Future', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) 29 June 1897 p.4

³³ 'Adulteration of Food and Drink written By a Victim.', the *Brisbane Courier* (Qld) 27 May 1886 p.2

³⁴ 'Katoomba Court', *Katoomba Times* (NSW) 2 June 1893 p.2

³⁵ 'Murder', *New South Wales Police Gazette and Weekly Record of Crime* (Sydney) 27 March 1895 p.113

³⁶ 'Indian Hawker Murder'. *Warwick Examiner and Times* 2 September 1896 p.2

³⁷ 'Murder of an Indian Hawker', *Daily Telegraph* 31 August 1896 p.3

In defence of hawkers

Racism was openly expressed by officers of the law. In early 1896 Magistrate Mr. G. H. Smithers refused to issue a batch of some 100 licenses of hawkers and pedlar 'on the broad ground that the applicants were either Syrians or Hindoos and that complaints had been made against them on the score of importunity.'³⁸ That is, of harassing a person to buy their goods. Shortly after, a block of 200 license renewal application was brought before a different magistrate Mr. G. T. F. Addison, S.M., chairman of the Licensing Bench presiding on the Bench. Addison asked Superintendent Read to get the inspectors and sub-inspector in the metropolitan area to report on any evidence of hawkers 'molesting and intimidating people' with whom they came into contact. None of the inspectors reported any complaints against hawkers.³⁹

Endnote

This article has looked at how racism, nationalism and sexual and moral panic impacted on the lives of chutney men - Indian, Syrian and Armenian hawkers - in the years leading up to Australian Federation and the enactment of the White Australia Policy.

³⁸ 'The Asiatic Hawker Question', the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 14c January 1896 p.3

³⁹ 'The Asiatic Question', the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 14 January 1896 p.3