

Lascar

Set in the interwar years, the play follows Ayan, a young man who leaves his home in search of work on a ship, encountering fellow brothers Akbar and Emran on his way to the port city of Calcutta.

Character list

Ayan: a determined young man seeking work

Akbar: one of the brothers accompanying Ayan

Emran: the younger and more nervous brother

Serang leader: a powerful serang, the employer of lascars

Serangs (wealthy men): a group of men overseeing the hiring process

Indian clerk: checks names off the ledger

British officer: oversees the clerk

Boatswain: the ship's senior officer in charge of the sailors

Scene 1: Calcutta, the port city

The classroom should be arranged so that the students playing Emran, Akbar and Ayan are sitting as a group, facing an imagined port (work created in the previous lesson can be hung up). Students should not wear jumpers/blazers, to help to signify their lower status. Dim lights, and the sound of seagulls and distant ship horns can be played to set the atmosphere.

Akbar: *(wiping sweat from his brow, looking out at the imagined docks)* The British still rule these seas, and they still need men to run their ships.

Emran: *(anxiously, wringing his hands)* But the last war changed things. I've overheard some men say Europeans don't sign on as many of our men as before. They want white crews.

Ayan: *(shaking his head, with quiet determination)* There's still work for us – dangerous, filthy work. But I will take it.

Akbar: *(noticing Ayan's mood, leaning closer to him)* Ayan, you're not like yourself today. What's going on?

Ayan: *(pauses, then speaks softly)* I dreamt of Kazi last night. He's sick and there's no one to look after him. We were orphaned young. We have no family left but each other. The money we had is gone, and without medicine, I don't know how much longer he has.

Akbar: *(softly, comforting)* You'll find work, Ayan. You'll get him what he needs.

(The sound of a steamship horn blares, cutting through their conversation. Ayan, Akbar and Emran stand up suddenly, the urgency in the scene growing. They look towards the imagined ships with a sense of destiny.)

Akbar: Then let's find the serangs. If we hesitate, we'll be left behind.

Students stand and begin walking quickly toward the back of the classroom, mimicking a rush through the busy streets of Calcutta, heading toward the next scene.

Scene 2: The serangs' inn

The classroom should feel more cramped now. A table is set up and a handful of students sit around the table, writing in ledgers. To represent the fact that they are serangs, they wear a blazer/sash/vest. The rest of the space can be filled with the actors representing the men waiting for recruitment.

(Ayan, Akbar and Emran enter from the back of the classroom and approach the serangs, stopping in front of the table. They sit to show the difference in status.)

Serang leader: *(stands confidently but looks at Ayan mockingly)* Kind of small, no?

(The serangs begin to jeer and laugh. Student playing Ayan kneels.)

Ayan: *(interrupts them)* I can work harder than most.

Serang leader: *(points a finger at Emran)* Can you honestly tell me that this boy will work harder than you?

(Both Akbar and Emran remain quiet, looking down.)

Ayan: *(looks at the brothers and then speaks)* *There is strength in brothers that cannot be measured in muscle or gold. Brothers share a bond that keeps them going when stronger men have given up.*

(Student playing Akbar now also kneels.)

Akbar: *(to the serang leader, with a defiant tone)* You'd be wise to know, I'll work just as hard for Emran as he does for me. We're not like the others here. We're family.

Serang leader: Will you become homesick? *(Pointing at Ayan)* You who have no family onboard?

Ayan: *(firmly, his voice steady)* I am older. I am a man.

Serang leader: *(chuckles coldly and sits back down)* No man is a man until he has worked a ship.

(The leader gestures for them to empty their pockets. Ayan and the others look at each other, then reluctantly begin pulling out coins from their clothes. They hand them to the serangs sat on the table, who jot down their names in the ledger.)

Serang leader: *(nods then waves his hand dismissively)* Report to the docks at dawn.

(The serangs continue their quiet discussion as Ayan, Akbar and Emran exit the scene with determination, heading toward the imagined docks at the back of the room.)

Scene 3: Boarding the ship

The classroom setup now represents the dockside at dawn. A long table is placed at the front, acting as the registration desk, where a student playing the Indian official checks the names of new workers. A student playing the British officer stands nearby, overseeing the process. At the back of the room, a separate area is designated for the European passengers; they may be imaginary, depending on the number of students in the class. A student who plays the boatswain should wait on the side of the stage.

(Ayan, Akbar and Emran walk toward the registration table. Other workers line up with them, waiting to have their names checked off.)

Indian clerk: *(without looking up, flipping through the ledger)* Name?

Ayan: Ayan Rahman.

Clerk: *(finding the name, marking it down with a pen)* Next.

Akbar: Akbar Sheikh.

Emran: *(quickly, before the clerk moves on)* Emran Sheikh.

(The clerk checks the names, marking them one by one. A British officer, standing nearby, glances at the line of workers without much interest.)

British officer: *(to the clerk, in a clipped tone)* Hurry them along. Cargo's already being loaded.

(As Ayan, Akbar and Emran step aside, they turn their heads toward the European passengers boarding from a separate gangway. These passengers are well-dressed – men in suits, women in elegant dresses with luggage carried by Indian porters.)

Emran: *(quietly to Akbar, watching the passengers)* They don't have to register like we do.

Akbar: *(bitterly)* No need. They know they belong.

The students playing the Indian clerk and British officer remove the table and chair and walk off stage.

(The boatswain now steps forward. He is a burly man with a rough demeanor. He carries a clipboard, scanning the gathered workers.)

Boatswain: *(gruffly, reading from the list)* Alright, listen up! You're on board now. You do what you're told, when you're told.

(He pauses, looking at Ayan, Akbar and Emran, before barking orders.)

Boatswain: *(pointing at Akbar and Emran)* You two – rigging duty. Move!

(Emran exhales with relief and steps aside with his brother.)

Both characters walk off stage.

Boatswain: *(finally turning to Ayan, eyeing him coldly)* You – below. Get in.

(Ayan hesitates for just a second before moving. As he walks through the door, which leads to a set of stairs to the ship's lower levels, stale air hits him, thick and suffocating. His expression hardens.)

Student playing Ayan walks off stage.