

## **MEMSAHIBS' WRITINGS: COLONIAL NARRATIVES ON INDIAN SERVANTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper analyses the colonial narratives of the British memsahibs during the Raj pertaining to their representations of the Indian servants who worked in their homes. These narratives dealt with the hiring, appropriate management, titles, duties, customary wages, supervision, advantages and disadvantages of the Indian domestic servants.

**Keywords:** Memsahibs, Ayahs, Domesticity, Caste-Restrictions

During the Raj, the fabulous India held the “British imagination in enchantment, which as time rolled on, changed imperceptibly to a kind of addiction” (Prakash 2-3) and led to the generation of a large body of literature written by the British men and women who during the working parts of their lives during the Raj became residents of India. A reading of this literature reveals that till the early decades of nineteenth century, these Britishers wrote about the exotic charms, mystery, limitless wealth, opulence, plays, epics and spiritual scriptures of India. Unfortunately, the representations of interactions with Indians, whom they were ruling, were minimal. But by the beginning of the early nineteenth century, a few British men and women began to include Indian characters as well in their writings. As during the Raj, Indian servants were “a ubiquitous presence in every British-Indian middle and upper class home” (Buettner 52) and every British family had ten to twenty Indian servants always there at their disposal. These servants worked for them as their cook (khnasama or bawarchi), waiter (khitmatgar), water carrier (bhisti), scullion (masalchi), gardener (maali), washerman (dhobi), head servant (bearer), grooms (syces), the lady’s maid and nanny (ayah), punkah coolies, palanquin bearers, gate keepers and many more.

These Indian servants played a very important part in the lives of the British in India during the Raj as they did all the odd jobs at their homes and outside their homes. They made the lives of their sahibs’ full of ease, comfort and luxury as they were always there at their disposal, whether they were at home, in office, on a hunting expedition or had to commute to some other place for personal or official work. Besides being a big support to the sahibs’ they were considered as ‘the biggest blessings’ by the memsahibs’ as they use to do all the household chores like cooking, serving, washing, cleaning, sweeping, fetching water, gardening, stitching, etc they were also a big support to them in their child rearing. Besides this they use to fulfill each and every whim and fancy of their sahibs and memsahibs. Because of the memsahibs varied experiences with and heavy reliance on these Indian servants these memsahibs wrote at great length about their Indian servants in their diaries, autobiographies, advice manuals, articles published in periodicals and letters written back home to their female relatives.

A few of the memsahibs acknowledged, praised and exalted their amenable, biddable, complaint and docile Indian servants in their writings. One of the memsahib narrates in her diary how during the memsahibs’ stay in India during the Raj “An ayah upon awakening her mistress in the morning, at the time specified by her mistress...knock at the door of the bedroom and bring in the early tea, placing the tray on the table, or where ever her mistress directs. She should never forget to salaam her mistress, and ask if anything is wanted, and what time her mistress desires to rise. She should then draw back the curtains and leave the room, remembering to take away the lamp, dirty boots & c.” (Steel and Gardiner 85) During the day all the Indian servants in the British households “performed the hard manual labour of housekeeping” and “most wives did not know, for example, what went on in their kitchens nor, so long as their servants produced a tasty dinner in a timely and proper fashion day in and day out, did they care.” (Procida 93) Emily Eden, a memsahib who stayed in India for eight years, in her Letters from India-I, describes to her family back home about the extremely dedicated and meticulous Indian servants. She explains that when their household moved from Calcutta to their weekend retreat at Barrackpore and back each week, all was “very well managed.” She writes “Our whole household is with us so entirely that our rooms at Calcutta are locked up when we come away, and yet, ten minutes after we arrive at Government House, every thing is in its place. A hot breakfast (more like a dinner) for eighteen people is on the table, and the servants are as quiet and composed as ever.” (Eden 112)

Lady Wilson, another British lady, was equally complacent about the ability of her Indian staff. In her Letters from India to England, she states “I have not yet ceased to be pleasantly surprised by the clock-work regularity with which everything is done. A wizened old genius of the tents and Akbar, the bearer, are responsible for everything, and there is never a hitch. As for the cook, all that he seems to need is two bricks or a hole in the ground . . . and [he] gives us a dinner as good as he ever prepared in his kitchen at home.” (Wilson15) In her another letter to her friend in England, she describes their camp while she was touring the Punjab with her husband in 1889. She writes “Anything cosier than our tent looks at this moment you could not imagine. We are sitting in our deck-chairs before the stove, with our feet on a wooden fender; the lamp behind us is hooked to the central pole of the tent. Jim is reading the papers, while I am writing to you. A bowlful of Gloire de Dijon roses on the table beside me is a delight to my eyes; beyond is a little bookcase filled with our favorite books, and on the top of it is the guitar, the poor ill-used guitar! We have pictures on our walls, comfortable chairs, tables and rugs, and in short, we are as snug as snug can be.” She adds “This camp, mind you, was moved every two or three days” and further tells “We have three tents—two for living in, and one for Jim’s office-work. While we are using one, the other goes ahead, and is pitched at our next halting-place. We generally move on every second or third day; but this is not so unsettling as you might think, for the next tent is a duplicate of the one we left, with everything in its place, our baggage having gone on before us. So the evening drive is only a little longer than usual, covering a distance of ten or twelve miles, and the daily routine is not interrupted.” (Wilson 13-14.)

A few memsahibs also recollected many instances of kindness by their domestics. One of them narrates an

incident when in the absence of her husband, (she) discovered that one of her servants had been sleeping outside her tent each night to protect her from potential dangers.” She adds that the servant discreetly returned to his quarters early each morning so that his concern would not be discovered. Another memsahib, Hilda Bourne, had all praises for her Indian ayah. She describes her as ‘a rock in the background’ and admits that her ayah was “a born nurse and had had much practice with other English babies, so knew exactly what to do.” Hilda adds “she taught me so much, bless her!”(Procida 99).

An indepth study of the narratives of memsahibs about their servants reveals that a few of British women in India during Raj focused on the nitty gritty of hiring Indian servants and the communication gap between the employee and employer in their narratives. They disclose that in hiring new servants the British generally relied on the opinion of the servants already employed with them and preferred their family members more. However, if this method failed they use to employ them on the letter of recommendation from their former employers. They unwrap in their writings that during the nineteenth century most memsahibs could barely speak or understand Hindi or any Indian language so they often miscommunicated with and misunderstood their servants. Few memsahibs focused on the caste restrictions in Indian servants. They disclose that no one must expect to find it an easy matter to manage a number of native servants, who will have different castes, not one of whom have anything in common with their employers. A few of them felt rather patronizingly that Hindus were superstitious and that British children left in their care would learn superstitious beliefs.

These British memsahibs apart from praising and maintaining the Indian servants also unveiled the problems which they faced while dealing with their Indian servants. A British woman in *The Young Ladies Journal* of 1861 reveals that the Indian servants are “a great nuisance at first” and the British “do not know one from the other, so much alike do they look. But as a shepherd makes the individual acquaintance of his flock by degrees, so does the English master gradually recognize the native in his pay.” (Walvin 40). Emily Short Wonnacott’s in her letter to her mother clearly wrote that “You would never like India I am sure, and the native servants are such a strange lot of people, dirty in the extreme and possessed of almost every bad quality.” (Chudhari 554). Mrs Guthrie described her ayah as very small, and very black and compared her to a monkey wrapped up in white muslin. Mary Irvine Wimberley, in her diary entry of 14 March 1826, mentioned that her servants just cheat, lie and steal. By describing these Indian servants as unclean, shabby, black, cheaters and liars these memsahibs emphasized on the superiority of the British community in India and the otherness and inferiority of the Indian natives.

A few memsahibs in their writings opposed the master-servant relationship between the memsahibs and their servants and opposed the practice of beating servants in India even over petty mistakes in a few British households. A memsahib records that “I am often told ... that the better a native is treated the more ungrateful he is; but I can not divest myself of the idea that he is – if a very bad specimen of the ‘man and brother’ – at all events, a fellow creature, and I really can not persuade myself or others that it does well to treat him like a brute.(Chudhari 555). Another memsahib also expressed the same sentiment when she wrote that if these servants are treated like dogs, cuffed here and kicked there, very naturally they will render you grudging service, will lie, cheat, steal, and circumvent, and think it fair play.

To conclude, the narratives of the British memsahibs during the Raj extensively dealt with their opinions about their Indian servants in India. As these “servants differ(ed) greatly in different parts of the country, their employers' opinions of them as a class vary as widely, ranging from enthusiasm to despair.” (Wilson 10) Since servants were the group of Indians with whom memsahibs had the most contact, their relationship with domestics shaped British memsahibs attitudes towards the Indians in general.

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