
Indian Social life in the Eyes of the British Romantic women Poets.

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Abstract

Wealth in any form attracts everybody sooner or later. In this field India has been a centre of attraction from Europeans to Arabians. European Memsahibs were not untouched to this fact about India. They in the search of better fortune sailed to this land of varied opportunities. Royal living of Company Officials attracted English women to have the fine hope and better future. The memoires of the British paint the social life of Indians at the same time when they had the time to enjoy the rich leisure hours. The fishing fleet has been a point of interest to young as well as senior sahibs at Indian shores. Governor Generals enjoyed the services of big trail of ayahs and male household servants.

Key words- wealth, memsahibs, trail of ayahs, Royal living of company officials, fishing fleet.

Introduction

The lure of wealth attracted people from different parts of the world to India. They came here and tried to mix up among Indians in order to learn their ways and manners of life. So did the English Sahibs and Memsahibs all were the part of attraction of India's richness. Sahibs and cadets came here to earn money respectably, while the memsahibs came to find a better suit in order to lead a happy and prosperous life thereafter. British women poets also had keen interest in the social life here and its portraiture in rhythmic words. The social heirarchy, the social system and life of India (both the British and the Indians) they delineated in fine words. Here we take both the issues - the lifestyle of the British as well as the Indians to our study. The first view of the Indian social life can be had from the information of household Indian servants in the sahibs' houses. In the family of Lord Lyton, the Viceroy, there were 300 indoor Indian servants of whom a third were cooks. In the elite families, servants were in heirarchical order. The salaries of these servants were more than that of the Indian officers in early independent India. The British started a tradition to give commission to these household servants.

In this way some of the servants did some theft in the master's house. The reports of these astray incidents were unusual. Even the loyalty of the servants was upto the extent that some ayahs were also taken by the Sahibs to England on their return home. This practice began in the eighteenth century. The reasons were many : 'a reluctance to leave behind a favourite, faithfut servant', 'a wish to recreate the nostalgic splendour of Indian

life in England', 'to minister to the needs of the family and children, during the long and arduous sea voyage back on'. The ayah was considered to be an expert in this or merely as a status symbol or curiosity. It is also a well recorded fact about an ayah who made fifty four round trips between Britain and India. Even in Britain, a well organized network of Ayahs was setup in London's east end.

Another point of discussion was the Indian marriage bazaar which was so flourishing that it was a point of common talk in Britain in 1800. The British social elites of India were in the eyes of marriageable British women. Every year they came to India to find a suitable match. Around 1800, there were 250 European women in Bengal and its dependencies against 4000 male inhabitants of respectability including military officers. It was therefore a normal practice for Sahib's to keep Indian bibis (wives) or set up zenanas, an Indian solution to their sexual isolation.

One reason of keeping Indian wives for British officers was of cost effectiveness. Pran Nevile in his book "Sahib's India : Vignettes from the Raj" points out an interesting incident :

The cost of landing a European wife in Calcutta worked out to Rupees five thousand - far beyond the means of ordinary company officials. On the other hand, according to Captain Williamson's guide book published in 1810, the expenses that had to be incurred on an Indian mistress worked out to Rupees forty per month.¹

Dowry remained a big problem even in a country like Britain from the time immemorial. In these days, in the respected families the only prospect for girls without dowry or physical beauty was spinsterhood. In these conditions, the wide spread information of Indian wealth among the British in India attracted the memsahibs in search of rich husbands. British who collected large fortunes in India were much sought after by the parents and guardians of marriageable daughters. The big cities of India like Calcutta, Madras, were the places where memsahibs were sought after by the British marriageable men. 'Fishing fleet' became a buzz word in Britain in the nineteenth century for the ships which carried such women to India.

English ships brought regular cargoes of venturesome beauties bent on matrimony, growing into a social phenomenon called the 'Fishing Fleet'. With this influx of women, Edinburgh came to be called the 'flesh market for Indian marriage mart'. London sent out supplies too. It was an age of quick marriages. The arrival of a cargo of young damsels was one of the exciting events for the waiting bachelors in India. To keep them chaste for the marriage market, unmarried women travelled under the care of chaperones, usually married women who were making the voyage to join their husbands. The age, height, manners, features and fashionable dresses of the young women became topics of conversation.²

The period from late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable change of British interest in India, in the people, history, literature, antiquities, customs and manners. Several British professional women artists applied their talents and they produced valuable collections of drawings, water colours and sketches of Indian life. Fanny Parks, Emily Eden, S.C. Belnos and Marianne Postans contributed

largely in this field. Fanny Parks' two volume journal "Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Pictuerque" (1850) contained many sketches of Indian life and panorama. She learnt Hindustani, but on her paintings she put her signature in Persian. She visited the Indian zenana and Indian ladies of rank who attracted Parks with their beauty and elegance.

'Twenty four plates illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal' the first album of S.C. Belnos depicts social history of India and the usual life and pursuits of Indians and Europeans. A beautiful portaiture of Holi celebration through her brush attracts the attention of the readers at once. Belnos also sketched a devout Hindu worshipping and reciting sacred verses during her daily routine.

Emily Eden, sister of Lord Auckland, the Governor-General (1836-52), had the chance to sketch the Indian nobles and their rich lives. She visited the court of Ranjit Singh at Lahore. Her fine portraiture of kingly costumes, jewellery, and women in their traditional look leaves an impression of rich Indian life of the nineteenth century. Marianne Postans, during her stay in Western India sketched the life from Kutch area. Cutch or Random Sketches, published in 1839 provides an interesting record of the native ruler and his soldiers.

Fanny Parks an inveterate traveler recorded picturesque landscape, natural beauty and diverse people in exotic costumes, festivals, rituals and rites, music and dance and even our cuisine in her portraits of India. Diwali, an Indian festival of lamps and decoration, is alively depicted in her memoirs. She describes a lustrous Diwali scene at the Ghats of Kanpur:

On reaching the ghat,' she says, 'I was quite delighted with the beauty of a scene resembling fairyland . . . On every temple, on every ghat, and on the steps down to the river's side, thousands of small lamps were placed from the foundation to the highest pinnacle, tracing the architecture in the lines of light. The evening was very dark, and the whole scene was reflected in the Ganges.³

The portraiture of Lord Ganesha, with rich decoration and a lot of fanfare engages the mind of the reader at once. The ritual of pooja with sacred Ganges water, rice, oil and flowers over the images of Gods captures the eye of the beholder. She also recorded some women, at this occasion, sending off their little paper boats, each containing a lamp, which floating down the river, added to the beauty of the scene. The river was full of such little lamps and looking like a big trail of lights. It appeared to her as if a garland of lights to the sacred river Ganga. She again put her feelings into words :

The river was covered with fleets of these little lamps hurried by the rapid stream. She was so thrilled by the sight that she recorded, 'I was greatly pleased: so Eastern, so fairy-like a scene I had not witnessed since my arrival in India; nor could I have "imagined that the dreary-looking station of Cawnpore contained so much of beauty".⁴

Attracted by the Hindu folklores of Krishna and his Gopis, she studied a lot about Indian folklores. She also piled a huge collection of the idols of Indian Gods and Goddesses in which Radha and Krishna were in their true and ideal couple form rejuvenating their eternal love.

In India, the British entered as traders. The Mughal emperors were ruling in India at that time. With Mughals, their Persian culture also dominated the Indian scene. The early British settlers also accepted and applied in their lifestyles the Indian traditions of food and dress. In the field of amusement and recreation, the British unhesitatingly accepted and participated in shikars, nautch parties, playing chess and smoking the hookah. In the search of amusement, they adopted the Indian lifestyle, fashion or custom to feel more at home.

Indian hookah and the sheer pleasure of smoking became very famous among ordinary as well as aristocratic British life in India. Pran Neville describes a gilded hookah in these exotic words :

The Indian hookah is described as an elegant and expensive equipage of a very complex form consisting of five individual components: the hookah bottom serving as a water reservoir, a snake or tube, a mouthpiece, an 'earthen chillum and a silver cover which fitted the rim of the chillum'.⁵

The factory miscellaneous records of 1765 reveal the dominance of the hookah. Hookah smoking became a famous pastime among the British in India. It was a luxurious habit which required an employment of a special servant - the hookah burdar. These hookahburdars were from Indian masses to be ready with their hookah after dinner regularly and usually whenever the master ordered. Later on the hookah and hookahburdar became a symbol of repute among the English and it was felt as a need in the dining hall. A resident of Calcutta composed a poem at the occasion :

What is it through hall magnificently long
Rolls the thick clouds and tunes the hollow song,
'Tis thou O Hookah! source of calm delight !
Oft grasped at morn and played upon till night.⁶

References

1. Neville Pran, Sahib's India : Vignettes from the Raj, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2010, pg. 26-27.
2. Ibid., pg. 27.
3. Ibid., pg. 47.
4. Ibid., pg. 47.
5. Ibid., pg. 75.
6. Ibid., pg. 79.