

The *Memsahib's* in Tea Industry: A Study of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts in Nineteenth and twentieth Century.

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Abstract: *The Memsahib's in tea plantations were mainly of British, Scottish or Irish descent. They enjoyed the social status derived from their husband's rank in the colonial hierarchy. A few of them were prolific writers, painters. On a larger garden the Memsahib might have one or two European assistants. Indian servants were an indispensable part of their daily mode of living. They were completely depended on Indian wet – nurses (ayahs) to breast feed their children. In short they established an identity for themselves in a European male dominated society by writing, travelling and most importantly by religious and philanthropic activity.*

Key Words : Memsahib's, Bungalow, Ayahs, Sanatorium, Purdah (veil), Planter's Club

In early tea planting days a great majority of the tea planters were British. Beginning with manager, assistant manager all was Scottish. A lot of the British planters had served in the Armed forces during the Second World War or had done service in the Reserves soon after the war ¹. It has been said by many historians that the 1857 mutiny was a watershed in Indian history not only for administrative reasons but also for the change in the inter – racial relations. This was also the period when the migration of Memsahib's in the colonial India reached its apex. The Memsahib's who came in India could not cross the unseen racial lines created by the British Raj for the Indian natives. The presence and the protection of the Memsahib's were repeatedly invoked to maintain the racial superiority of the British Raj. They were better known as '*Memsahib*' or '*Mrs. Sahib*' in the colonial India ². In early days Memsahib's in tea plantations were mainly of British, Scottish or Irish descent. They enjoyed the social status derived from their husband's rank in the colonial hierarchy. The present paper put emphasises on particular section of the 'white women' in tea – plantation industry ² who were elite in their social status. The fundamental aim of this research article is to draw a pen picture in regard to the life style maintained by the white Memsahib's of the tea industry in the proposed area of our study. As we know the *Memsahib's* in colonial India received adequate attention from the academic World. Numerous research works have already been done on them whereas in regard to the tea industry they are not getting proper attention as yet.

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Moreover, memories written by former European Managers often paid very little attention on their wives. They were portrayed negatively as narrowly intolerant, more prejudiced and vindictive towards the colonized than their men, abusive towards their servants, usually bored, viciously gossipy, prone to extra – marital affairs destructive to peaceful social relations and cruelly insensitive to women of the colonized races. It is really surprise to see that the white men were portrayed as civilised, ordered and sexually pure than their wives of the same race. The invisibility of official wives (Memsahib's) in the memories written by European planters provides a distorted and incomplete picture. In this backdrop an attempt has been made here to make a study in this field.

The early tea planters of India were a colourful, varied and totally inexperienced collection of men, who usually had no idea where were the best places to plant tea bushes, let alone how to cultivate them and process their leaves. Many of whom were young men fresh from England who generally had no knowledge whatever of the business in which they were engaged. The men who tackled this task had to be the hardest of the tea pioneers, for they had no precedent to follow and were the first Indians to try to settle in these initially inhospitable areas³.

With the development of communication like railways it was possible for the European tea garden managers to get married and begin their family life in India⁴. The majestic toy trains such as "Messrs, Sharpe, Stewart & Co. of Glasgow" was the most indispensable part of communication to the European planters along with their wives to reach Darjeeling⁵. Their children could go back to their motherland for education. The *Memsahib's* were elaborated in the writings of the European planters as an ideal wife who used to assemble at European Club along with their husbands for social gatherings. They had to maintain various fold of duties such as provide hospitality to European travellers, adornment to official dinners, parties and receptions, welcoming and socialization of the newly arrived wives. A few of them were prolific writers, painters. A few sketches of the Darjeeling Planter's Club still recall us the majestic days of Darjeeling hill in colonial period. In short, during their years of residence in the country, they maintained journals and diaries, wrote novels, penned their memories. The Memsahib's lived in their Bungalows remain totally disconnected with the outside World. They seldom came into contact with the other white women of colonial administrators especially during the festival season of Christmas⁶.

The *Memsahib's* then, living in lonely places far away from modern civilisation developed certain hobbies. Bungalow was double storied locally known as 'Chang Bungalow'. The Memsahib's had a penchant for keeping a number of animals as pets in their Bungalows. They varied from the usual cats, dogs, mynahs and parrots, rabbits and guinea pigs to more unusual ones such as deer, geese and other snakes. However, they

Were fond of gardening, supervised servants and sometime crossed her boundaries to do certain welfare activities. Actually they performed only domestic duties and thereby help to uplift the image of the British officials in Indian tea industry⁷. The writing of Jeannette Duncan's "*The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib*" deserves special attention in this field. She opined that the Memsahib's had no exordium in Indian tea industry. They were only figured as wife, mother and mistress⁸. In this context the Indian tea family created a difference. A few Indian women played an important role behind the progress of Indians owned tea gardens. References should be mentioned to Mrs. Ila Paul Chaudhury of Mahargaong Gulma Tea Estate, Begam Fayjanecha of the renowned Nawab family of Jalpaiguri town and so on⁹.

The most salient feature of the British official's writings was to draw the private life of the Memsahib's¹⁰. Dane Keith Kennedy in his book "*The Magic Mountain: Hill Station and the British Raj*" emphasised exclusively on such relations like relation with their husbands, children and other relatives. He argued that the hill stations were the most favourite places to the Memsahib's of the European Managers. He further stated that "... to establish sanatoria within the sub continent where European invalids could recover from the heat and diseases of the tropics"¹¹. Hence Darjeeling was the most favourite hill station across the whole undivided Bengal where the aspirant British officials got opportunity to make contacts that accelerated the tempo of their career, for pensioners to enjoy their retirement and for the invalids to seek their health¹².

Literary to say, Darjeeling hill originally earmarked only as a recuperative sanatorium for civil servants and the military. The hill station must be considered not only in terms of the social history of the British but of the Indians as well especially the Bengali elite class of undivided Bengal. The first Indians to establish some sort of presence in the hill station were the Princes. Drawn by the prestige and political might associated with these stations, a number of wealthy princes began to take up seasonal residence in the early twentieth century. The princes, however, were not the only Indians to enter the hill station. A growing number of Bengali elites put their feet at the Darjeeling hill station in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century¹³.

Many *Memsahibs'* begins her diary romantically with the description of their honeymoon in a launch on the River *Teesta*, the boat that brings her to husband's tea estate for the first time. What a beautiful start to a young woman's married life! Mrs. PT's diary also tells us of the local tribal people, her visits to their villages on most favourable terms, witnessed their festivals and dance. We read of her life in the bungalow at *Mannabarie* tea estate, of her fishing expeditions and shooting adventures. Her diary also contains the story of her first ride on an elephant and her visit to a mill by trolley.

The winter seasons were spent in Darjeeling, Guwahati and Shillong with all the festivals of Christmas, boisterous club evenings and various outdoor sports. The Memsahib's sometimes also acted as an arbitrator to settle disputes among the local people¹⁴.

The British authorities were highly interested to keep the Memsahib's within certain socially codes of conduct. Hence certain norms of western social behaviour were said to have efface such as ballroom dancing. In addition to that low cut evening gowns were sometime disapproved of on the grounds that these would create among the Bengali *Babus* and labourers a sense of disrespect for the white women. Moreover numerous rumour were also spread by the garden authorities that there was mass brutal rape of the Memsahib's by the native men. This resulted in confining the whole white women community of the tea industry in '*purdah*' (veil) who was discouraged from mixing with the natives¹⁵. It is important to be cited out here that before the coming of the Memsahib's the white men used to see the native women equally and did not maintain any racial segregation with them. Even many of them married the native women and the production came to known as Eurasian or Anglo – Indian children. But with the advent of Memsahib's after the *Sepoy* mutiny took place in 1857 the white men were prevented to marry the native women and procure Eurasian or Anglo – Indian children¹⁶.

In the early years of independence the club culture was another recreational side of the European tea planters. The Darjeeling Planter's Club (1868), Darjeeling Shooting and Fishing Club', Darjeeling Gymkhana club (1909), Darjeeling Golf club' (1905)¹⁷, Rink Theatre (1900)¹⁸, Jalpaiguri European club are worthy to be mentioned here. They used to reach their bungalows after completing the amusements with their luxury vehicles or some time in *Richsaw*. But some conservativeness was maintained in regard to their family members. Children were neither seen nor heard in the club and strict dress codes were maintained for their wives. Only one drink allowed for them at the bar after tennis before changing into normal cloths. Nor is anyone expected to leave the club after dinner until the *Burra Sahib* has departed¹⁹.

Most European wife had contracted malaria within their first six months in this region and often within their first six weeks. The nearest doctor was seldom less than a day's ride away. The 'doctor Babu' (an Indian trained to medical – orderly level to look after plantation workers) or a mission post where basic medical knowledge and medicine might be available if they were lucky was the best the planter could hope for by way of outside assistance. Usually the planter had to be his own doctor and dose himself. They also try to keep their wives healthy by doctoring them with "quinine every morning, castor oil twice a week and calomel at the change of the moon". On a larger garden the *Memsahib* might have one or two European assistants. Diaries and letters home were full of accounts of fierce and indeed sometimes violent clashes between autocratic and bullying managers and their often innocent and ignorant assistance²⁰.

Now we go to discuss the relation of the Memsahib's with their Indian servants. Before their advent in India they had no perfect idea about the Indian servants. Their husbands working in tea industry as Managers, officials, staffs or even as Missionaries draws a negative image about the Indian servants to their women through their letters, diaries or autobiographies. The servant's dark skin and their religions, social and linguistic differences largely responsible behind the creation of the negative attitudes of the *Memsahib's* towards them. However, this sort of obnoxious feeling began to efface out with the coming of Memsahib's in India since the mid of the nineteenth century. With the passage of time Indian servants became an indispensable part of their daily mode of living. The majority of Indian servants employed to serve the Memsahib's were the labourers of the garden. In the eyes of the Memsahib's the male Indian servants were placed in the similar position with their female servants and were treated as their children. Most importantly the rate wages of Indian servants was not very low as it was to the garden labourers in those days. For example the ayahs used to get Rs. 12 – 20/- per month, washer men get R. 8 – 12/-, cooks Rs. 4 – 8/- , body guards Rs. 16 – 30/- and so on²¹.

As most of their husbands were posted in remote areas situated from the far flung area of the town, their wives had neither relatives nor close friends to get recreation. This gap was fulfilled by their native servants and that is why a cordial friendly relationship came into existence between them. This relation also proved as a fertile one especially in case of pregnancy of the white *Memsahib's*. As we know, scarcity of physicians was a prevalent feature in most of the tea gardens in those days. Under such circumstances, many pregnant *Memsahib's* sought mid – wives rather than physicians. *Memsahib's* who lived in the tea gardens with their husbands suffered from miscarriages, gynaecological problems and depressions. Perhaps the most acute problem of the Memsahib's during that period was the aloofness from their mothers. It was held that a memsahib's mind was weakened during periods of puberty, pregnancy, child birth and menopause. Letters from their original homeland somehow could satisfy their emotional needs. Such tale of physical suffering and morbid anxieties of the Memsahib's during confinement and delivery are prevalent in various records of tea industry²².

Moreover after the birth of a child the Memsahib assumed new responsibility. She faced child – bearing in an alien land where the mortality rate of the white children was more in the colonies than what it was for the children in Britain. This resulted in the creation of anxieties in their mind. So as per doctor advice many Memsahib along with their infant preferred to spend the summer days at hill stations. The fundamental aim behind such settlement was to save their children from the deliberating effects of Cholera, heat stroke, diarrhoea in summer days. In addition to that the Memsahib's were completely depended on Indian wet – nurses (*ayahs*) to breast feed their children. As per

doctor advice the climate of the Teari – Dooars region was not perfect for the white women to breast feed their children. Hence they used to keep Indian wet – nurses to solve the problem who served as a milch – cow to them. This relation sometime bought the white infant much closer to the Indian *ayahs* rather than their actual mother. It was no doubt another flake of anxiety to the white women about the future of their infants. It is reported that in an earthquake a young planter's wife was killed when she rushed back into her collapsing bungalow to rescue her baby, unaware that its *ayah* had already done so. It suggests that the Indian servants were always keen to assist their Memsahib's²³.

During the inter – war period many Indians had been recruited to junior positions in tea garden management. In some cases they groomed as potential managers. This change could only possible with the calling up for military service of the majority of the younger British tea garden managers and assistants during the Second World War. By 1941 more than six hundred (35 per cent of the total British employment on Indian tea gardens) had answered the call to the colours. However, this emergency situation bought dramatic changes in relation between the wives of Indian staffs and Memsahib's. Differences had not been so much about race as economic status and power.

The hot climate of Dooars region was considered to be a reason for the madness among the Memsahib's. Furthermore, the alienating and stressful social and economic conditions of gendered life in colonial tea industry also aggravated the mental problems among the Memsahib's. Under such circumstances, they were used to ship back to their original homeland at Government's own expanses²⁴.

The Memsahib's also took part in various social reforms and welfare activities. The dazzling appearance of the white women in wedding ceremony and other festivals of the garden labourers was another side of their humanitarian attitude. A large number of primary schools came up in Teari – Dooars under their initiative to impart elementary education among the children of the garden labourers. Their welfare activities were undertaken for the welfare of the society which indeed placed them outside the realm of the more expected life of the Memsahib's. In short they established an identity for themselves in a European male dominated society by writing, travelling and most importantly by religious and philanthropic activities²⁵.

Thus we may conclude our discussion that the Memsahib's in India tea industry merely unthinkingly echoed the prejudices of the white community. Like other white women in Indian sub – continent the Memsahib's of tea garden were also compelled to spend their life in a conservative society. Their status derived from their husband's occupation. They were never permitted by the white male dominated community for the development of individualism. It offered them with the ready – made roles which gave these women the psychological security of knowing where they belonged. Actually they

had no legal voice and no political or economic power. They were seldom visible either in the official records or in the board of directors of tea gardens.

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