











Nitin Varma

## Servant Testimonies and Anglo-Indian Homes in Nineteenth-Century India

On August 21, 1818, Ramonee, a thirty-year-old woman from Patna in eastern India, appeared before the Supreme Court at Fort William, Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> Ramonee, who worked as an *ayah* (child's nurse, lady's maid), was called as one of the witnesses in a case brought by her former employer, Major Cunliffe. A British military captain stationed in Cawnpore (a cantonment in northern India), Cunliffe was accusing his wife Louisa of adultery.<sup>2</sup> A charge of adultery directed against wives, as in England at that time, allowed husbands to sue their wives' accused lovers for damages. This was usually followed by proceedings in the ecclesiastical side of the court over the separation of bed and board of the estranged couple (similar to legal separation). A full divorce was extremely rare and often the privilege of the rich and influential. This required a private act of the British parliament and usually cost a fortune.<sup>3</sup>

There was another problem for the British residents of India if they wished to or were capable of taking this route. The witnesses required to establish the charge – servants, other household members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues – could not usually travel to England to appear before parliament. In 1820, a change in regulation allowed the Supreme Courts of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay to summon witnesses and collect evidence to substantiate the allegations made by the husbands on behalf of the British parliament. The evidence and trial details were then forwarded to London for further action. The details of this particular case, including Ramonee's testimony, became available when Major Cunliffe applied for a full divorce in 1823.

A premium on morality marked a break from the *nabobs* (Europeans who made a fortune in India and often imitated the lifestyle of Indian elites) of the late eighteenth century who lived a life of excess and had several liaisons with the native *bibis* (Indian mistresses of *nabobs*).<sup>4</sup> The growing presence of white women in the colony in the nineteenth century provoked new anxieties and their transgressions appeared to threaten the patriarchal order; the act of 1820 was a gesture in that direction.<sup>5</sup> The change from white *nabobi* homes to *memsahib* households was noted in handbooks written for British subjects and servicemen in India published in 1810 and 1825.<sup>6</sup> Here I

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<sup>2</sup> The details of the divorce proceedings are recorded in the annual Proceedings of the British House of Lords for the relevant years. I have been able to collect around thirty trials spanning a period of forty years (early 1820s to early 1860s) held at the Supreme Courts of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Ceylon.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660–1857* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Durba Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Joan Mickelson Gaughan, *The 'Incumberances' British Women in India, 1615–1856* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Williamson, *East India Vade-Mecum or Complete Guide to Gentlemen intended for the Civil, Military, or Naval Service of the Hon. East India Company* (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsburg, 1810); John Borthwick Gilchrist,





A servant's gaze of an Anglo-Indian colonial bungalow, based on an ayah's court testimony

am less concerned with the new anxieties around adultery and divorcing practices, but rather with the testimonies of the servants who were summoned to court to give evidence in support of their masters' claims that their mistresses had committed adultery. Servants' testimonies do not speak directly about the nature of Anglo-Indian homes but are directed towards establishing the guilt of the mistresses and their lovers.

An attempt to reconstruct the nature of homes and master-servant relationships in early nineteenth-century India through an examination of divorce trials does not immediately appear to be a productive research strategy. So why divorce trials? Conventional historical studies of domestic

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*The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum for the Public functionary, Government Officer, Private Agent, Trader or Foreign Sojourner, in British India, and the adjacent parts of Asia immediately connected with the Honourable the East India Company. Being a digest of the work of the Late Capt. Williamson* (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsburg, 1825).

relationships in Anglo-Indian households are often framed through the employer's perspective. There is substantial discussion in the literature of the anxieties of white masters with respect to their native servants who are seen as essential in the everyday functioning of Anglo-Indian homes.<sup>7</sup> Their dependence on and close proximity to servants reveals racial, class, and colonial tensions. *Ayahs* like Ramonee were seen as proximate to the *memsahibs* and indispensable for child rearing in the colonies, but such intimate and dependent ties were also perceived as undermining the sense of superiority and distinctiveness of the colonial master. Such closeness was further fraught by threats of dirt and disease associated with such contact. Manuals, travelogues, letters, and even diaries also limit our perspective of these domestic relationships.<sup>8</sup>

My research on *ayahs* relied heavily on this material initially, yet I was struck by how little could be known about women who worked as *ayahs* in European homes. There was a lot of material (textual, visual, and literary) that described how employers both celebrated and feared *ayahs*, but I could hardly assess if *ayahs* shared those views or had some other sense of this relationship. Were they sharing the sense of intimacy with the *memsahibs* and infants? Were they anxious about the violation of caste and racial boundaries? In an attempt to probe these issues further, I took the advice of social historians, and particularly micro historians, who have read the judicial archives carefully and creatively to write the history of the marginal.<sup>9</sup> Several recent South Asian legal historians have alerted us to the fact that case law has been largely underused in the writing of South Asian social history, and that it has great potential in reconstructing of the histories and experiences of subaltern groups.<sup>10</sup>

A preliminary look into the cases appearing in the civil and criminal courts of the nineteenth century showed a presence of servants embedded in the homes of their masters and beyond. The disproportionate presence of servants in published divorce trials was striking. Like other cases in which servants appear, they are not the protagonists but their presence in courts as witnesses (though in limited ways) opens up a possibility to raise new questions and offer different perspectives. In this essay, through a closer examination of one trial, I will explore the nature and functioning of the homes of white masters and native servants in early nineteenth-century India.

## The Case of Ramonee

Ramonee worked briefly as an *ayah* in the household of Robert and Louisa Cunliffe. In early 1817, Louisa Cunliffe went to Calcutta by boat with two of her children who were being sent to England. It was a common practice for the children of parents based in India to attend school in England. On her way back to Cawnpore, Louisa Cunliffe was accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Loftus and their

<sup>7</sup> Nupur Chaudhuri, "Memsahibs and their servants in nineteenth century India," *Women's History Review* 3 (1994): 549–62.

<sup>8</sup> Indrani Sen, "Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: *Ayahs*, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in colonial India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16 (2009): 299–328; Suzanne Conway, "Ayah, Caregiver to Anglo-Indian Children, c. 1757–1947," in Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight, eds., *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 41–58.

<sup>9</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Cheese and the Worms* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). For a more recent reading of a particular case see Amy Stanley, "Maid-servants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900," *The American Historical Review* 121 (2016): 437–60.

<sup>10</sup> Mitra Sharafi, "South Asian Legal History," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 11 (2016): 309–36.

young infant child. Loftus was taking charge as an army captain in Cawnpore and it appears that he was known to Louisa as an old acquaintance and friend. The arrival of the Loftus family with an infant required an *ayah* and Ramonee was hired through a reference working in Cawnpore. Unlike other servants of the household, Ramonee's task of taking care of the child required her to be present inside the bedroom of Mrs. Loftus during the night. During the course of the trial, Ramonee gave a vivid account of how the families organized themselves inside the bungalow. Ramonee described the bungalow, which appeared as a fairly typical *mofussil* bungalow, as a ten-room house with low ceilings. The Cunliffes occupied a sleeping room and their children slept in another room. The Loftuses were accommodated in two rooms of the house, one in which Mrs. Loftus slept with her infant (and Ramonee) and an adjoining room that was assigned to Mr. Loftus as his sleeping room. Ramonee noted that Louisa Cunliffe twice went into Major Loftus's sleeping room late into the night. On these occasions, Major Loftus would usually lift the mosquito net covering his bed and invite Louisa to sit down. They would then enter into a conversation in a tone and language which was unintelligible to Ramonee. On both these occasions, Ramonee fell asleep and therefore could not definitely confirm when Louisa finally returned to her own room. Her evidence in the ecclesiastical court in 1818 was crucial in establishing the affair.

When the same case came up in 1823 for a divorce, the Supreme Court of Calcutta ordered the witnesses to be examined. The male servants of the household appeared in court but the different levels of intimacy and access they shared became fairly evident. The male servants in court were Nundooram, Ghonisham Etwarry, and Cocundoo, and they had all been employed for a longer period (between eight and twelve years) in roles ranging from being personal attendants, attending tables, and bearing torches. The only male servant who seemed to have some knowledge about the "private" and "intimate" details of the case was the torchbearer Cocundoo. He had accompanied Louisa Cunliffe to Calcutta when she traveled to see off her children to England. He returned with her to Cawnpore onboard a *Pinnace* (a lighter boat), while Mr. and Mrs. Loftus traveled on a *Budgerow* (a bigger, sluggish boat). They all dined together on the *Budgerow* and it was Cocundoo's task to escort Louisa Cunliffe back to her boat after dinner by torchlight. In this role, he became privy to certain encounters between Louisa and Mr. Loftus, which he later detailed in court.

Since it was clear from the proceedings of the earlier trial that Ramonee's account was crucial, she was summoned to appear in court again. But Ramonee had since left the employment of Cunliffe and could not be immediately traced. A search for Ramonee at the behest of the court (and also Mr. Cunliffe) gives us information about her life from 1818 (when she first appeared in court) until 1823 (when she was called to reappear in court). This helps us to reconstruct some of her biographical details, and would not have been possible if she was present at that time or had been traced immediately. The search was conducted through male servants of the household who knew Ramonee from work; a couple of them had accompanied her when she came to Calcutta at different stages of the case. One of the servants, who accompanied Ramonee on a boat journey from Cawnpore to Calcutta, mentioned in court that she insisted on making a stopover in Patna as she wanted to visit her "family and relations." After making this particular halt in Patna, she visited the house of Imad Khanun, a Muslim woman of repute, which Ramonee described as her home. This particular home appeared to be a sisterhood, where single women, possibly outcast women or widows, could find refuge.

After staying a couple of days at her home, Ramonee proceeded to Calcutta. In Calcutta, Ramonee stayed in the house of Mr. Hunter (an acquaintance of Mr. Cunliffe) and took up employment there. After the initial trial, the other servant left for Cawnpore but Ramonee stayed on. Working with these leads, another servant was sent to find Ramonee in Patna and he again visited the household of Imad Khanun. She mentioned that Ramonee had left her job in Calcutta and come

back to Patna around 1819–1820. This was the time of a raging cholera epidemic and Ramonee had fallen ill and moved out of the house with another female servant. She could not be traced any further.

Ramonee found work as an *ayah* in the homes of Europeans. She moved within the region from Cawnpore to Calcutta, and frequently traveled back to what she described as her “home” in Patna, the household of Imad Khanun. We know little about her social and marital background. Was she ever married or was she widowed? It seems that she was Muslim or a lower-caste woman. We know very little about the circular migration of single women working for wages in early nineteenth-century eastern and northern India. This brings into focus places like Calcutta (a colonial city) and Cawnpore (a cantonment) emerging as places of ‘service’ that drew people from eastern India into the wage market.<sup>11</sup> This predominantly involved the migration of men but a category of female caregiver (*ayahs*) was also marking its presence and growing prominence. The magisterial survey of Buchanan Hamilton covering this region in the early part of the century offers little to explain their presence.<sup>12</sup> It seems that the figure of *ayah* in an earlier period was paralleled by a “young girl” brought under the “protection” of a family of rank and status through purchase or adoption to serve through their lives.<sup>13</sup> *Ayahs*, in contrast, were relatively older women working for wages and rarely had a long-term dependent relationship with the employer’s family. Did the setting up of European homes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with a demand for servants based on gender, caste, and religion create a market for wages for women like Ramonee? How do we situate the home of Ramonee, a sisterhood of single women mostly comprising lower castes, Muslims, and widows? It becomes fairly clear that *ayahs* did not consider themselves part of the master’s home and would be employed for varying periods while also going back to places which they described as their homes. The dominant notion of servants becoming part of their master’s home as subordinate members needs to be revised.

Ramonee and the other *ayahs* who appear in the legal cases rarely had long-term associations with particular households. Their working lives were marked by a series of short-term positions including extended breaks in employment. There were other instances of kin members (often daughters) substituting in times of absence or during the transfer of the employer’s family to a different location. It does not seem that an *ayah’s* work was a lifecycle employment as women would work as *ayahs* in several short-term engagements. It also appears that *ayahs* working in European households sought employment in other European households and there was little movement of servants between European and non-European homes. The nature of this employment seemed to be highly specialized such that *ayahs* were often hired either to take care of infants (termed a child’s *ayah*) or to attend to the mistress (a lady’s *ayah*). This specialized nature of the work also explained the shorter duration of employment. Some *ayahs* were specifically hired during childbirth and would be discharged within a few months of the delivery. *Ayahs* taking care of smaller children would be out of work when the children were ready to be sent to England for school, usually when they turned five. This also explains a particular personalization of authority, where *ayahs* attending the lady and the children were seen as attached to the mistress and would move with her if the mistress decided to leave the household, which often happened during divorce

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Marshall, “Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta,” in Pradip Sinha, ed., *The Urban Experience: Calcutta* (Calcutta: Riddhi India, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811–1812* (Patna: The Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1936).

<sup>13</sup> Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).



trials. Male servants, in contrast, were seen as under the master's command and seem to have been employed for longer periods in comparison with *ayahs*. Questions of intimacy become relevant in this context: Did these short-term engagements allow close and intimate ties to develop? Did Ramonee feel attached to the Cunliffes' child? Was leaving her job marked by emotional trauma and pain? We cannot come to a conclusive answer but at least we are alerted to the limits of these representations, which celebrate deep attachment and fondness between *ayahs* and children as the emotional foundation of Anglo-Indian homes.

## Conclusion

The relevance of servants in divorce trials was based on the understanding that they were integral parts of colonial households and therefore had access to its everyday workings. In several trials, the testimonies of *ayahs* were seen as particularly crucial because they were perceived to have the most intimate access to the *memsahib*. But it is important to distinguish the levels of access servants had to the private and intimate domains. Even male servants who worked for longer periods of time were less relevant in these trials as they had less knowledge of the workings of the private domains of these homes.

The representation of the Anglo-Indian home as a stable unit of father, mother, and children attended on by a vast retinue of servants has to be interrupted by the presence of male guests and other European couples who could potentially stay there for extended periods of time. The nature of the Anglo-Indian home with the ubiquitous presence of servants in its everyday functioning and reproduction also needs to be situated alongside an understanding of how they were linked to homes of servants. The more longer-term male servants would be relatively attached to their master's home, at least for the period of employment. Yet the separation of boarding (in servant quarters) and food (the servants typically cooked their own food separately) and enduring links with their rural backgrounds meant that their idea of 'home' was not completely subsumed under the shadow of their master's home. Female servants, and particularly *ayahs*, who worked more intermittently and often changed employment due to the nature of their work, would be less integrated and often went back to the spaces they described as their homes.

Ramonee's testimony was crucial alongside other testimonies of servants, friends, and acquaintances in clinching the case in favor of Robert Cunliffe for securing a divorce from Louisa Cunliffe. In some ways this reflected an emerging template for divorce trials, in which household servants would appear in court to back their master's charge of adultery against their wives. The mistresses rarely appeared in court or brought forward their witnesses to refute these charges. The double-standard inherent in these divorce trials shaped the testimonies of servants such as *ayahs*, whose close proximity to their mistresses did not necessarily lead them to give a favorable opinion about their conduct as wives. This also reflected a lack of empathy between mistresses and servants distanced by class, racial, and even linguistic differences. A limited sense of 'familiarity' and 'friendship' that some English women developed for their female servants in England was rarely found in the colony. Yet, at the same time, these trials opened a small possibility for the servants as witnesses to register their views about their employers and even themselves and their experiences of life and work. The views about natives as generally untrustworthy and unreliable were in these particular legal moments somewhat undermined when as witnesses they became entitled and were encouraged to speak about their employers.