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Servant Subversions: Reading the British Anxiety over 'Native Nuisance' as Infra-Politics in Anglo-Indian Household Manuals

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ABSTRACT

The British colonial domestic space emerges as a critical site for interrogating the racialised dynamics of empire, owing to the proximity it fostered between the coloniser and the colonised. While extant scholarship predominantly underscores colonial hegemony and control within this space, our study, while acknowledging this premise, undertakes a contrapuntal, against-the-grain reading of Anglo-Indian domestic manuals to foreground the subversive agency of "native" servants. These manuals—produced between 1850 and 1900, a period roughly coterminous with the apogee of Victorian moralism and imperial confidence—serve not merely as instructional texts but as anxious colonial archives, inadvertently documenting servant resistance. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, this study probes the discursive constructions of "native servant problems" as symptomatic of deeper tensions and anxieties embedded in the colonial household. By exposing the manuals' aporias and symptomatic silences, we argue that seemingly mundane acts—such as feigned ignorance, strategic disobedience, delay, pilferage, and non-verbal defiance—constitute forms of infrapolitics that subtly unsettled the Anglo-Indian domestic order and, by extension, the colonial power matrix. The manuals analysed were selected based on their accessibility and availability, ensuring a representative sample of prescriptive domestic literature circulating during high imperialism. Our findings reveal that native servants were not passive subjects but stealth agents of disruption, whose infrapolitical manoeuvres subverted the performative authority of white domesticity. This reframing compels a reconsideration of the colonial household as a fraught space of power, negotiation, and everyday resistance.

Keywords: Anglo-Indian; colonial; servants; domestic manuals; infrapolitical resistance

INTRODUCTION

In the intricate matrix of colonial domesticity in India, the Anglo-Indian[1] household was more than a space of culinary order and domestic regulation. It was instead a critical site where imperial hierarchies were performed, contested, and occasionally fractured. Domestic routines, far from being mundane, embodied mechanisms of authority, surveillance, and discipline, orchestrated through household manuals, cookbooks, and prescriptive literature that sought to inscribe racialised and gendered structures of colonial power. Victorian ideals of cleanliness, punctuality, and culinary propriety, transplanted into a colonial setting, were mediated through the indispensable yet suspect figure of the "native" servant. In this paradox lies the tension that both structured and destabilised the domestic sphere under colonial rule. The nineteenth-century Anglo-

[1] Anglo-Indian-colonial expatriates who came from Britain and settled in India. Not the Eurasians.

Indian household manuals[2]—authored predominantly by colonial homemakers and administrators—functioned as textual extensions of the empire's epistemic project. These manuals offered meticulous instructions for the regulation of servants, the preparation of meals, and the surveillance of everyday tasks, revealing the anxious desire to preserve British identity in a foreign land (Sinha, 2019). For instance, Steel and Gardiner (1893) prescribe:

> Inspection parade should begin, then, immediately after breakfast … The cook should be waiting—in clean raiment—with a pile of plates, and his viands for the day spread out on a table. With everything *in evidence*, it will not take five minutes to decide on what is best.
>
> (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, pp. 9-10)

This ritualised inspection underscores the disciplinary ethos of colonial household management, where the cook's performance is not only scrutinised but staged as a performance of servility. However, interspersed within these rigid frameworks are subtle clues that complicate the narrative of uninterrupted colonial authority. Beneath the veneer of order lies the evidence of disobedience, improvisation, and quiet rebellion by the very subjects meant to uphold imperial order. As Hunt and Kenny (1883) lament:

> If you give a cook money overnight, he probably spends half of it on drink, and 'squares' in the morning by buying cheaply, tainted meat and fish, and stale vegetables, which he smuggles into the cook-room, so as to escape your observation.
>
> (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 139)

Such instances expose the porousness of the mistress's disciplinary reach and highlight the servant's agency in manipulating the mechanisms of control. Beyond domestic manuals, colonial archives also record more overt attempts at resistance. The final tragedy of the revolting "native" subjects, Hanna and Hackema, underscores the high stakes of aspiring to a life—private and conjugal—beyond the domestic order sanctioned by colonial masters.

> The tragic story of Hanna and Hackema demonstrates the high stakes of aspirations to conjugal life independent of the will of masters. In May 1728, a slave woman, Hanna, stole gold and silver ornaments worth one hundred rupees from her master, Khwaja Gregor, an Armenian merchant residing in Calcutta, and fled with her lover, a freedman, Hackema. For Hanna and Hackema, theft was a crucial means to their freedom and a life not ordained by Hanna's master. Hanna and Hackema had unsuccessfully tried to steal from Khwaja Gregor six months before. Hanna was pardoned that time on her promise "never to be guilty of such actions again nor any more to keep company with Hackema"…They (Hanna and Hackema) were caught by her master's search army the very next day. With the stolen goods on them, they had no safeguards against the brutal justice of the Mayor's Court and were both sentenced to death.
>
> (Chakraborty, 2019, p. 63)

If the brutal finality of the incident, as dispensed by the hegemonic system, must not be missed, then what remains prominent is the attempt of resistance (theft) from a subalternist servant's position. When read together, these three moments—ritual inspection, covert subversion, and overt defiance—form a layered commentary on the workings of power within the colonial household. While the first two derive from domestic texts and reflect the colonial imperative to regulate, the third, drawn from court records, reminds us that the stakes of such regulation could

[2] Anglo-Indian domestic manuals guided British women in establishing colonial domesticity aligned with British norms. As extensions of Victorian print culture, they moralised household management as a racial and civilizational duty, transforming domestic order into imperial governance (Blunt, 1999). Codifying everyday practices—from culinary routines to servant discipline—they sustained a sense of British identity abroad while exposing anxieties over proximity to culturally dissimilar "native" servants (Chaudhuri, 1988; Leong-Salobir, 2011). Their prescriptive tone reinforced imperial hierarchies within colonial domestic space.

be deadly. While the lack of direct archival testimony precludes a fully recuperative subaltern narrative, the imaginative contours of these texts allow us to discern the anxieties and fissures that betray the limits of imperial authority (Chaudhuri, 1988; Sen, 2009). The intertextual reading of these fragments reveals both the reach and the fragility of colonial authority within private spaces. As we will argue, to read the Anglo-Indian household manuals solely as instruments of colonial hegemony is to overlook the countercurrents—however faint—that suggest the presence of agency, negotiation, and resistance by those subjugated. In the sections that follow, we extend this reading across a broader corpus of texts to illuminate how the domestic subaltern, often elided from the historical archive, might be retrieved through a close and critical engagement with the colonial imagination itself.

SERVANTS' RESISTANCE: FROM BRUTAL TO SUBVERSIVE

Colonial records, newspapers, and domestic manuals reveal a spectrum of servant resistance in British India—ranging from overt violence to quotidian subversion. The *Leeds Times* (1861) reported the murder of a Lieutenant Steward by his "native" servant in Nusseerabad, allegedly provoked by accusations of theft. Similarly, the *Fife News* (1879) noted the violent assault of a field officer's wife by a domestic servant, a retaliation believed to stem from repeated charges of dishonesty. While such incidents reflect brutal ruptures within the colonial domestic order, subtler forms of resistance—embedded within everyday performances—abounded.

H.E. Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1897) preserves an illuminating 1778 charge sheet filed by Superintendent C.S. Playdell, capturing myriad servant transgressions. These included theft, deception, assault, and professional misrepresentation—offences that, rather than being dismissed as isolated infractions, can be read as calculated disruptions. Runjaney, a cook, was accused not only of abandoning his post but also of assaulting his replacement—an act that symbolically contested his dispensability (Busteed, 1897, p. 188). Theft, frequently cited, included cases like Cook Tithol's appropriation of household utensils, or *matraney's*[3] , resale of empty bottles to a local shopkeeper (Busteed, 1897, p. 188). *Mosalchee*[4] Tetoo's alleged pilfering of wax candles and manipulation of peer employment relations reveals a layered subversion—undermining both economic property and the hierarchy of domestic servitude (Busteed, 1897, p. 188).

Professional deceit—servants lying about skills or absconding post-payment—also destabilised colonial trust. Ramsing, hired as a carpenter, was later exposed as a barber (Busteed, 1897, p. 188), while Khoda Bux and Peary absconded after receiving wages (Busteed, 1897, p. 188). These breaches not only disrupted household functioning but also signalled refusal to internalise colonial discipline.

Nitin Sinha (2019) identifies deeper complicities in organised crime, such as the 1835 Serampore gang led by Panscowry Mootchy, where domestic servants acted as informants and perpetrators (Sinha, 2019, p. 282). Cases like Guy Musalman replacing a saddle to sell the new one (Sinha, 2019, p. 282) further highlight economic sabotage. Even minor infractions—like the theft of a tablecloth (Friends of India, 1864)—were not simply petty crimes but symbolically charged acts that subverted the supposed sanctity of colonial order.

[3] Women employed to perform menial tasks
[4] A servant involved in maintaining the light and lamp, or someone who curates spices

These documented instances of theft, pilfering, negligence of duty, and other disruptive behaviours by servants in colonial households suggest that "native" servitude could be dismissed as signs of incompetence or moral failings; however, they may well be read as disruptive challenges that were indeed problematic for the colonisers. These acts of subversion, far from being mere inconveniences, could have actively undermined the ideals of order and control that the colonial domestic sphere sought to embody. Our research seeks to critically engage with these dynamics by analysing the instances of such subversive acts, documented in Anglo-Indian domestic manuals, by reading them against the grain as subtle forms of everyday resistance.

UNDERSTANDING INFRAPOLITICS

Before proceeding further, it is essential to outline the theoretical foundation underpinning this research—James C. Scott's notion of infrapolitics. Traditional conceptualisations of resistance often centre on grand gestures—uprisings, protests, and revolutions. However, Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) repositioned resistance as an everyday, covert phenomenon practised by the subjugated. Unlike overt political defiance, everyday resistance operates through subtle, dispersed, and often ambiguous acts that elude direct confrontation. These include "foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on" (Scott, 1989, p. xiii). Such acts, while individually insignificant, collectively represent an ongoing refusal of domination—resistance that is "the technique of 'first resort' in those common historical circumstances in which open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger" (Scott, 1989, p. 34). These infrapolitical gestures, though often mistaken for incompetence or disorder, are fundamentally resistive, registering a failure of the colonial power to be performed as it is imagined. Since colonial hegemony, as Gilpin (1981) suggests, relies on asymmetrical dominance— "a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states" (p. 29)—the fragility of such power structures becomes evident when these performances are quietly undermined. Such infrapolitical performances, as performed by the "native" servants, were perhaps best addressed by H.E. Busteed in 1897:

> From the earliest days of the English settlement in Bengal, servants appear to have been a fertile source of worry, and to have always been adepts at the *passive resistance and the organised combination to injure and annoy*, which characterise them to this day.
>
> (Busteed, 1897, p. 114)

As evident in Busteed's commentary, there was an always-already sense of ingrained fear in the colonisers regarding the "native" servants wielding agency to passively resist and inflict damage to colonial domesticity. Despite such latent anxiety, Anglo-Indians remained deeply dependent on their servants (Kingscote, 1893). For example, Hull and Mair's (1878) manual gives a fascinating insight into the number and typology of the "native" domestic help*, khansamah*[5]*, kitmutgar*[6], cook, *mussalchee, bazaar coolie*[7], two bearers, two (sometimes four) *punkahwallahs*[8],

[5] Steward or butler
[6] Waiter
[7] Servants associated with purchasing commodities in the market
[8] Servants appointed to pull the hanging fans. to keep the Anglo-Indians cool

two *mallees*[9], *bheestie*[10], *durwan*[11], *mehtar*[12], *ayah*[13], *mehteranee ayah*[14], *dhobie*[15], *durzee*[16], a coachman, three *syces*[17], and three grasscutters (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 123). The list demonstrates not only the flamboyant consumption in the maintenance of an Anglo-Indian household, but also an overreliance on "native" services. Overlooking any challenges in managing such an array of service providers, Steel and Gardiner assured, "housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 1). However, such assurance was perhaps a reflection of an inane generalisation of the perceived astute managerial capacities of the Anglo-Indians (especially the women) and the impending infrapolitical threat from "native" servants.

RATIONALE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

Our study analyses Anglo-Indian domestic manuals as critical sites for understanding colonial hegemony and race relations. Positioned far from the metropole, Anglo-Indians sought to replicate Britishness within domestic spaces, often through mimetic practices, reinforced by domestic manuals (Leong-Salobir, 2011). However, such attempts were complicated and thwarted by the everyday presence of the culturally dissimilar "native" servants (Chaudhuri, 1988), whose proximity posed both practical and ideological challenges to maintaining British domestic ideals. Despite the prescriptive efforts in the manuals, colonial households remained heavily dependent on "native" servants. This dependency often undermined the ideal of a homogenised English domesticity, creating aporias that allowed space for a subtle, everyday form of resistance. Such infrapolitical practices (Scott, 1985)—small acts embedded within routine labour—exposed the anxieties of the Anglo-Indians.

While colonial domesticity has been studied through lenses of race, gender, and class, Anglo-Indian household manuals remain a relatively underexplored archive. Existing scholarship has typically focused on broader domestic dynamics—such as race relations, the positioning of colonial/colonised women, and the roles of native servants in maintaining Anglo-Indian households. For example, Chaudhuri (1994) examined how Anglo-Indian women imposed imperial ideologies on servants, while Blunt (1999) analysed domestic exercises of colonial power. Ghose (2007) unpacked orientalist myths about Anglo-Indian women, and Sen (2009) highlighted tensions between *memsahibs* and native female helps, and the porous racial boundaries within colonial homes. Sinha (2019) and Sengupta (2021) further explored labour, class, and everyday resistances within domestic spaces. These studies typically analyse a wide array of sources—letters, journals, periodicals, and autobiographies—whereas our research focuses exclusively on Anglo-Indian domestic manuals. Building on Sen's (2009) work, we examine how manuals documented the infra-political actions (Scott, 1985) of native servants—quiet subversions that disrupted colonial domestic order without overt political resistance. These manuals reflect the dual

[9] Gardeners
[10] Water supplier
[11] Watchman or Guard
[12] Cleaning servant
[13] Female servants to pregnant Anglo-Indians and babies
[14] Female servants were associated with cleaning the household. Usually appointed to assist the Anglo-Indian women
[15] Washerman
[16] Tailor
[17] Horsekeeper

role of Anglo-Indian women as domestic managers and cultural enforcers, revealing anxieties about native proximity and labour.

The timeframe of our study corresponds with the Victorian era (1837–1901), a period when ideologies of domesticity became institutionalised (Mylander, 2009). The publication of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1852) and Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) revolutionised women's roles in print culture and domesticity (Blunt, 1999; Cohen, 2017). Influenced by such texts, Anglo-Indian manuals proliferated after 1850, offering prescriptive guidance on managing colonial homes, disciplining native servants, and replicating British domestic ideals. These manuals functioned as imperial tools, extending colonial power into the private sphere and regulating racial hierarchies within the home (Blunt, 1999; Sen, 2009). Anglo-Indian domestic manuals were written to assist British women—particularly newly arrived *memsahibs*—in reproducing a semblance of English domesticity in the unfamiliar and often disconcerting colonial setting of India. These texts offered prescriptive guidance on managing the colonial household, disciplining "native" servants, navigating climatic and cultural dissonances, and upholding the moral order expected of a Victorian home. They functioned as instruments of imperial pedagogy, enabling British women to assert control over domestic space and labour, thus extending the logics of empire into the intimate interiors of colonial life (Blunt, 1999; Sen, 2009).

INFRAPOLITICS IN ANGLO-INDIAN HOUSEHOLD MANUALS

Instances of infrapolitics, within the colonial domestic space, could be observed during the attempt to recreate the British-Victorian household in the Indian colony. The process of mimicking the Britishness (read Victorian) involved aspects of domestic spatiality, culinarity, (Riddell, 1853, p. 376) and associated practices (including shopping and home remedies), sartorial culture, furniture and other paraphernalia (Steel & Gardiner, 1893), social interactions, and other miscellaneous (and/or extended) household chores (childcare, gardening, farming, etc.) (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 1). However, the attempts at replicating the British practices in India required the Anglo-Indians to involve and acculturate "native" domestic help. One may well conjecture that the forced acculturation could have been a reason for the servants to obliquely resist colonial practices. Our article does not propose to psychologically delve into the resistant psyche of the "native" servants but rather to critically enumerate the infrapolitical narratives by reading colonial household manuals against the grain.

KHITMUDGIRS, *KHANSAMAH*, AND COOKS

Domestic manuals aimed to provide Anglo-Indians with considerable knowledge regarding the management of the colonial household. Such manuals captured race relations through culinary narratives. Breakfast and the performances around it form a considerable part of the culinary sections of the manual. Manuals document two distinct breakfasts—*Chhota hazri* (early morning tea with light breakfast) and the *bara hazri* (the elaborate breakfast proper). Before reading resistance, one may point to the hegemony around the colonial breakfast performances by close reading of the word *hazri*, which in its wake might have triggered "native" infrapolitics. The word *hazri*, in Urdu, refers to the act of summoning, and thereby signifies an unfailing obligation for a subordinate to appear. In spaces where culinary consumption is invested with such hegemony, it may unknowingly generate its counter-resistance. Such culinary colonialism (Grey & Newman,

2018) could have opened up subtle resistive politics by the subalterns. Although the manuals punctiliously detail the kind of food to be strictly served in these *hazris*, the inability of the "native" cook to prepare the "breakfast beyond chops, steaks, fried fish, and quail" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 50) displeased the colonisers. One may not concretely ascertain such incompetence as purposeful resistance; however, the performance of the "natives" while serving breakfast indeed generated absolute disgust among the Anglo-Indian masters. The serving of the food being entirely vested on the "native" cooks and *khitmudgirs,* one may well read subversion in the regular delay in the first course of "toast and butter," when the breakfast was "half finished" and "and the laying of the table for lunch while the breakfast-eaters are still seated" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 50). Here, one may ascribe these instances to be an overreading of infrapolitics and might associate such resistive practices with a lack of socialisation. However, not all native domestic servants were naïve or unskilled, but rather extremely efficient workers who once enjoyed a position of repute. For example, a *khansamah* in the "Mughal period was a literate political figure; he was the high steward of the imperial household, commanded control over all personal staff of the emperor" (Sinha, 2021, p. 182). However, under the colonial influence, the *khansamah* started losing their position and by the "late eighteenth century were shorn of their political role and reduced to simply running the household" (Sinha, 2021, p. 182). This historico-professional trajectory of the *khansamahs* indicates a systematic deskilling and devaluation of their roles by the colonisers. No wonder the retaliatory acts by the *khansamahs* could be critically read as infrapolitical performances.

Comparatively discernible everyday resistances that were documented in the manuals included instances where the "native" domestic cooks served "pies with dusty, half-dried smears of gravy clinging to the sides of the pie dish" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 52) or the more repulsive account of the "*khitmutgar* using his toes as an efficient toast-rack" or straining of the soup "through a greasy *pugri*"[18] (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 52). The mention of such obscenity certainly sabotaged the high ethos of British dining. An almost sabotaging behaviour was the cook's "temptation of chopping up meat, onion, and garlic" upon paste boards or biscuit boards (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 73) kept for serving guests condiments. Even Hunt and Kenny (1883) documented the defiance of a "native" cook who made "the cook room his sleeping apartment" (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 137) and did not "hesitate to convert the chopping-board into a dressing-table" (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 137). These undermining tendencies of inflicting damage to the British dining standards could be read as an attempt aimed at subtly redistributing control and maintaining a sense of agency by the "natives".

Anglo-Indians utilised several measures to keep away the "native" nuisance around food, one of them being the strict categorisation of servants' duties. One particular regulation, as documented in the manual by Steel and Gardiner (1893), instructed the cook to purchase the commodities without the intervention of the other *khansamas* (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, pp. 77-78). The advice by Hunt and Kenny was to send off the cook (and not the *khansama*) to purchase the fresh supplies at daybreak. However, they strongly advised against providing the "native" cook with the money the previous night, for the cook tends to appropriate the same for personal purposes (especially, drinking) and instead stealthily "smuggles" cheap, stale supplies (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 139). Yet, the cook occupied an important position in the household. The manuals generally instruct not any servant but one particular one (the cook, the butler, or the head servant) to have monetary access for daily groceries. Here, one may read, albeit at the micro level, the British political ideology of 'divide and rule' being deployed among the "native" domestic

[18] *Pugri*- Turban—a piece of cloth worn by "natives" on their head, therefore, stained with sweat and dirt.

subjects. The colonial master vested a work of import (and the same might be seen as a chance to earn some sly supplementary income through commission by the "natives") on a particular servant and not all (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 78). The act of earning a commission is also reflected by A Lady Resident (1864), where the butler "confines his business to walking to and from the bazaar to make purchases for the house, on which he gets as large a profit as he possibly can" (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 42). When commodities were purchased within the precincts of the house, the chief servant who bought products had a chance to earn his commission between three and twenty-four per cent (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 85). Hence, it is evident that the commission was different for different commodities and highly dependent on the deviousness of the servants and their nexus with the "native" sellers of produce. What is noteworthy is how the "natives", whether as sellers or middlemen and commission-demanding servants, together suppressed the white consumer voice. The entire transactional performance, essentially orchestrated by the "native" seller-buyer, may be seen as an attempt at the creation of a more democratic-negotiatory-resistive space that had the capacity to dehegemonize the white consumer-master's financial determinacy in the market.

NAUKARS, CHAKARS, AND PUNKAHWALLAHS

Covert racialised infrapolitics against the colonial authorities found expression in the domestic performances of the servants. One such practice involved the utilisation of "fine glass cloths" for "scrubbing the kettle" and turning them "black with grease and dirt" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 82). The authors also pointed out the possibility of damaging the cloth "from the manipulation necessary to remove the filth" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 82). Even A Lady Resident (1864) suggested supplying the "native" servants with separate cloths for cleaning the lamps (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 65), to prevent utensils from carrying the smell of oil—an indication that the cleaning cloth was being used for multiple domestic tasks. The author further instructed readers to supply the "native" servants with "chamois leather and some brushes" for cleaning plates to prevent servants from resorting to using "chalk and brick" that damaged utensils (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 65). Such indigenous methods, while effective for local utensils, were ill-suited for the exquisite equipment owned by the Anglo-Indians. The servants, however, frequently disregarded such instructions and often damaged the kitchen equipment, sometimes to the extent of erasing the maker's name. This could be read as a symbolic act of undermining the colonisers' sense of possession/control. A Lady Resident documented how servants undermined the colonial practice of coffee drinking by substituting flannel bags with dusters or table napkins for straining coffee (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 68). An apparently humorous anecdote revealed how a servant admitting to using worn socks for coffee preparation exposed the expatriates to potential health hazards (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 68). Such documentations, albeit carnivalesque, may be perceived as a subversive performance that inverts the colonial hierarchy. In this reading, the servants' acts are not simple mishaps or ignorance, but irreverent gestures that parody and destabilise the seriousness and sanctity of colonial domestic order. These everyday disruptions transform the household—a space meant to showcase imperial control—into a site of comic disorder, where the low mocks the high and the supposed superiority of the coloniser is momentarily undone.

Extending the discourse of the filthy habits of the "natives", Hunt and Kenny (1883) observed servants cramming meat-safe drawers with candle-ends, lamp rags, and all kinds of dirty items, and also allowing food to remain after it had turned stale. Hunt and Kenny revealed the

practice of the "natives" in supplying stale fish (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 123) and filthy water (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 129) to Anglo-Indians, thereby exposing the Anglo-Indian expatriates to the horrors of diseases such as dysentery (Kingscote, 1893, p. 36), diarrhoea, and most significantly, cholera (David, 1986). Perhaps we can read such narratives as covert attacks on the colonial master's somatic being and problematizing their ideology of a developed culture of white cleanliness, or as Bashford would have it, "imperial hygiene" (Bashford, 2003). If institutionalised hygiene was racially determined and based on a scale of whiteness (Bashford, 2003), then the "native" infrapolitics surely thwarted sanitation policing.

Servants who were coerced to work rigorously for hours in Anglo-Indian houses often slacked off and underperformed their chores, perhaps consciously. For example, the *punkahwallahs* who were made to work tirelessly throughout the day, on minimal wages and very little rest, were surely over-exhausted: "sometimes fall asleep", and "the punkah stops" while "the unfortunate sleeper gets bathed in perspiration" (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 154). Such adverse working conditions of the Anglo-Indian domestic space drove the *punkahwallahs* to resist the colonisers, albeit slyly. One such sly performance could be observed in a picture by Ellsworth Huntington in his book *The Human Habitat* (1927), where a listless "anaemic" *punkahwallah* could be seen pulling the *punkah* with his feet, instead of his hands. The utilisation of feet in performing one's duty for one's superior also reflects a digression from the indigenous Indian culture, where the use of feet resembles a display of disrespect towards any animate or inanimate object. Such recalcitrant antipathy to perform one's work is a "hidden transcript"[19] (Scott, 1985) by the subaltern that adds to the political act of protest at the margin (see Figure 1).

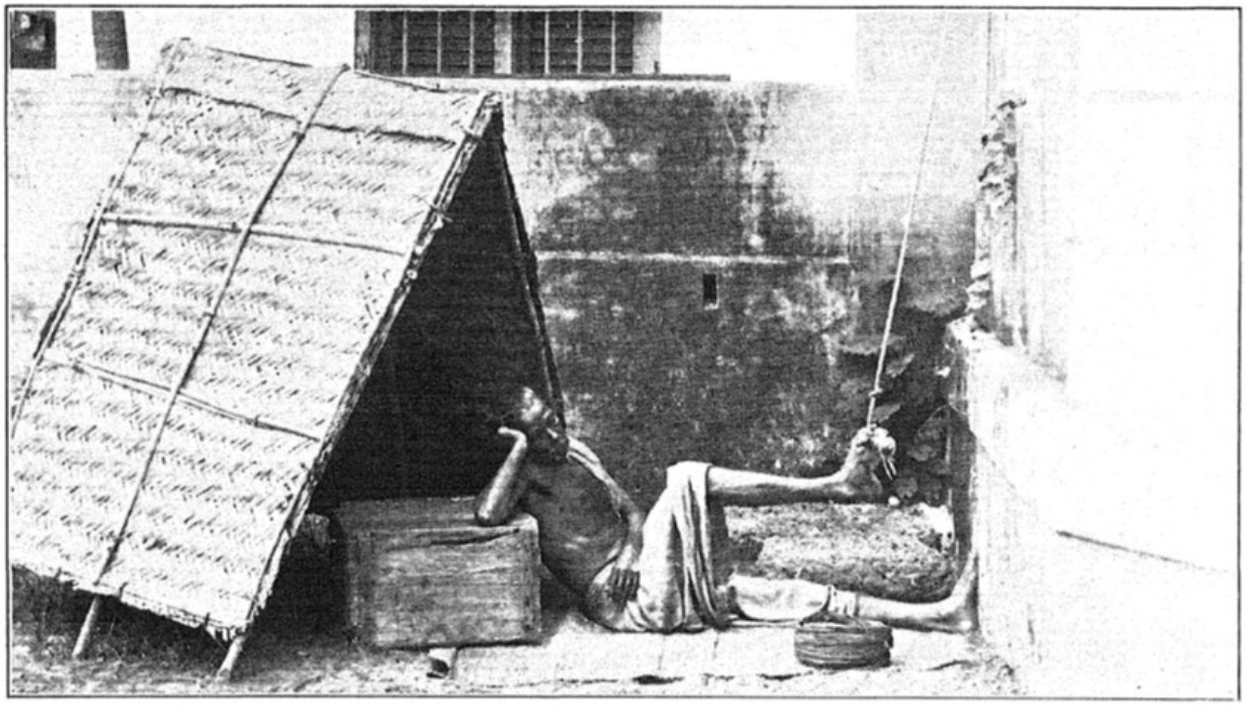


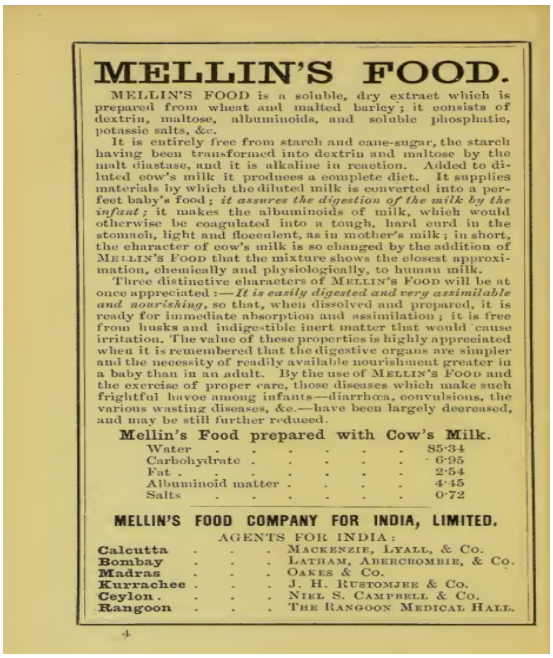
PLATE XVIII. ANAEMIC INDIAN COOLIE TRYING TO SLEEP AND AT THE SAME TIME COOL HIS BRITISH RULERS BY WORKING A PUNKA OR FAN.

FIGURE 1. *Punkahwallah* using his feet to pull the *punkah* in an Anglo-Indian domestic space (Huntington, 1927, p.145)

[19] According to Scott, discourse is that which takes place offstage beyond direct observation by powerholders.

The documentation of the "native" servants' stealing from colonial households could be ascribed to the low wages of the "native" servants. The 1759 and 1760 Resolutions that fixed the wages for the "native" servants saw little reform even a century later (Sinha, 2021). Moreover, Hunt and Kenny (1883) advised against the payment of advanced wages to servants. Such low wages, perhaps, compelled the servants to pilfer items from the expatriate household. Riddell (1853) documented the appropriation of commodities such as "tea, sugar, bread, milk, paper, and such like articles" (Riddell, 1853, p. 7). Even Hull and Mair (1878) documented similar acts, especially the pilfering of oil (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 88). 'A Lady Resident' instructed readers to maintain an inventory to keep track of all household items. Even Hunt and Kenny (1883) instructed Anglo-Indian readers on keeping nifty items under strict supervision. Pilfering of items was not limited to trivial commodities, but such resistive acts also extended to valuables such as silver. Hunt and Kenny (1883) criticised the careless habits of the *memsahibs* of leaving valuables unattended, thereby enabling "barefooted servants" to steal from the expatriate household (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 157). On the subject of stealing from the colonial household, Riddell (1853) reported that the servants concealed "in general the petty thefts and cheatings of one another from their master" (Riddell, 1853, p. 8), thereby orchestrating a unified resistance of a subaltern community against any colonial attempt of 'divide and rule.'

Extending the discussion on possible subalternized unity, Hull and Mair documented how the "native" servants and the "native" shopkeepers connived together to conduct a fraudulent trade involving the adulteration of European alcohol with "the most villainous concoctions" and pass it "off as the original contents" (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 101). Such duplicitous acts left the colonisers vulnerable to the consumption of spurious products. This further decimated the ubiquitous colonial signs of wealth and class—the consumption of counterfeit liquor deflated the "master's" social capital. Moreover, the habit of the "native" domestic help to adulterate certain household consumables, such as milk, created difficulties within colonial households. Hull and Mair criticised the quality of milk sold by the "native" servants (*gowwallah* or milkman) to be "largely watered, and subsequently thickened with crushed plantains, [and] rice-flour" (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 93). The adulteration of milk with water and other commodities greatly influenced its nutritional values and, hence, was unsuitable for Anglo-Indian babies. Anglo-Indian babies were vulnerable to several tropical diseases, which made it mandatory for them to consume nutritious foods. To facilitate the nutritious consumption of Anglo-Indian babies, Kingscote's manual (1893) suggested the implementation of food supplements from Mellin's, Nestle's, Savoury and Moores', and Robinson's (barley) (Kingscote, 1893, pp. 30-31). The ads by Mellin or Nestle in Kingscote's manual (1893) further ratified a lack of faith in the poor quality of cow/goat milk or its administration to colonial babies. Mellin's food supplement, as its ad in Kingcote's manual indicated, available in all colonial presidencies and metropolitan towns, is suggestive of its popularity among the colonial expats who administered the same along with cow's milk to make a complete diet for the Anglo-Indian babies (see Figure 2).



MELLIN'S FOOD.

MELLIN'S FOOD is a soluble, dry extract which is prepared from wheat and malted barley; it consists of dextrin, maltose, albuminoids, and soluble phosphatic, potassic salts, &c.

It is entirely free from starch and cane-sugar, the starch having been transformed into dextrin and maltose by the malt diastase, and it is alkaline in reaction. Added to diluted cow's milk it produces a complete diet. It supplies materials by which the diluted milk is converted into a perfect baby's food; *it assures the digestion of the milk by the infant;* it makes the albuminoids of milk, which would otherwise be coagulated into a tough, hard curd in the stomach, light and flocculent, as in mother's milk; in short, the character of cow's milk is so changed by the addition of MELLIN'S FOOD that the mixture shows the closest approximation, chemically and physiologically, to human milk.

Three distinctive characters of MELLIN'S FOOD will be at once appreciated:—*It is easily digested and very assimilable and nourishing*, so that, when dissolved and prepared, it is ready for immediate absorption and assimilation; it is free from husks and indigestible inert matter that would cause irritation. The value of these properties is highly appreciated when it is remembered that the digestive organs are simpler and the necessity of readily available nourishment greater in a baby than in an adult. By the use of MELLIN'S FOOD and the exercise of proper care, those diseases which make such frightful havoc among infants—diarrhœa, convulsions, the various wasting diseases, &c.—have been largely decreased, and may be still further reduced.

Mellin's Food prepared with Cow's Milk.

Water	85·34
Carbohydrate	6·95
Fat	2·54
Albuminoid matter	4·45
Salts	0·72

MELLIN'S FOOD COMPANY FOR INDIA, LIMITED.

AGENTS FOR INDIA:

Calcutta	MACKENZIE, LYALL, & Co.
Bombay	LATHAM, ABERCROMBIE, & Co.
Madras	OAKES & Co.
Kurrachee	J. H. RUSTOMJEE & Co.
Ceylon	NIEL S. CAMPBELL & Co.
Rangoon	THE RANGOON MEDICAL HALL.

4

FIGURE 2. Advertisements of food supplements in Anglo-Indian domestic manuals (Kingscote, 1893)

Going back to the act of milk tainting, one may be reminded that the Victorian public discourse was replete with concerns about tainted milk and its potential to spread infectious diseases. Conjuring the Victorian-colonial anxiety about tainted milk, the "native" servants unleash the possibilities of infrapolitical resistance within a space of colonial domination.

GOWWALLAH, SYCE, DIRZIE, AND *DHOBIE*

The "native" servants frequently ignored the European methods of cattle rearing and implemented indigenous ways while tending to the domestic animals. Steel and Gardiner documented a situation where the Anglo-Indian owners strictly instructed the separation of the calves from their mother right after their birth (Steel & Gardiner, 1893). However, when the Anglo-Indian family had to shift to a "camp" for a few weeks, the mother and the calves were united, and the latter were seen suckling at the mother. The documentation further reveals that the "native" servant in charge of caretaking defied orders and united the calves with their mother in the context of separation being an "unnatural and impious arrangement" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 115). The "native" servant marked the Anglo-Indian arrangement as immoral and even impious and thus risked his piety to trial. The conflict between Anglo-Indians and "natives" regarding the maintenance of domestic animals reflected the different ideologies of animal rearing among two different religious and racial groups. Clearly, the "natives" couldn't openly defy the instructions of the colonisers but resorted to stealthy acts to dodge expatriate surveillance.

Infrapolitical acts in the caretaking of domesticated animals were also visible in the maintenance of the horse within the colonial household. Maintenance of the horse, although a laborious task, compared to other forms of domestic labour, yielded a meagre wage for the *syce.* As documented in several domestic manuals, the *syce* earned around Rs. 5-6 as compared to a *khidmutgar* who earned around Rs. 8, or a *khansamah* who could earn up to Rs. 10 (Riddell, 1853, p. 3; Steel & Gardiner, 1893, p. 62). Such disparity in the wage structure was perhaps one of the

factors that may have compelled the *syce* to resort to certain infrapolitical acts. J.A. Nunn, an Army Veterinarian and late principal of the Lahore Veterinary College, in *Notes on Stable Management in India and the Colonies* (1897), strictly instructs readers to pay their *syces* well, or face the possibility of the horses' grains being pilfered by the servant (Nunn, 1897). Apart from the possibility of the horses' supply being pilfered, the colonisers also faced the possibility of the *syce* being "careless" in the maintenance of the horses. For example, they often washed all four legs of the horse at once in the morning (Riddell, 1853, p. 36), exposing the limbs to cold, thereby making them vulnerable to abrupt swelling and eventually causing the hoof to rot (Riddell, 1853, p. 39). Nunn (1897) even strictly advises against washing the horses, stating a similar reason. It is noteworthy, of course, that despite such prohibitions, the *syce* engaged in washing the horse, thereby leaving it vulnerable to cold and ailments. Riddell (1853) also noted acts of ignorance of the physical well-being of the horses and warned expatriates to be wary of the horse keeper hiding accidents (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, pp. 165-166) that may cause the formation of galls and lumps, that "may prove a serious nuisance" if overlooked for a long time (Riddell, 1853, p. 30). Such horses might have been used to draw carriages for the transportation of the expats. Therefore, it was an absolute necessity to keep the horses healthy. However, these likely infrapolitical practices, as demonstrated by the *syces,* indicate a possibility of inflicting/overlooking injury to the horses, thereby impacting the expats' preferred mode of conveyance.

Not only the *syces* but also the *dirzies* were service-providing groups that had to be reckoned with in a colonial domestic setting. Sartoriality and clothes have been significant social symbols for ages, and the same has been prominently reflected in Victorian culture (Seys, 2014). Through the sartorial culture of the Victorian period, the colonisers not only promulgated the notion of social symbolism but also upheld the concept of being culturally superior to the other races, especially that of the colonised nations. Maintaining cultural superiority in the colonies through British sartoriality needed a rethinking of the English clothing, primarily due to the distinct climate difference between Britain and India. Due to climatic differences, the colonisers had to make certain transformations, especially to the texture and material of their clothes, yet keep Victorian standards and aesthetics intact (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, pp. 8-9). Maintaining the Victorian sartorial culture in the colony was not achievable without the intervention of the "native" *dirzie*. However, the assistance extended by the *dirzie* was not always without a hint of confrontation. Steel and Gardiner's manual state that "few *dirzies* can be trusted to cut out without any supervision" (perhaps hinting at the damage or even stealing of cloth that the *dirzies* were capable of) and the *dirzie* must show the *memsahib* "the patterns tacked on to the stuff before the fateful scissors are brought into use" (Steel & Gardiner, 1893, pp. 105-106). Hunt and Kenny advised the *memsahibs* to leave "her measures with a good and reliable dressmaker" back in Britain so that she could readily be supplied with a dress upon application (Hunt & Kenny, 1883, p. 10). *Dirzies*, permanently employed in colonial households, were also under the habit of ditching their duty and working elsewhere on "higher daily wages" (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 59). *Dirzies* in the colonial household were employed with a monthly payroll, which gave them the leverage of skipping work some days and working at other places for some extra income. Even Hull and Mair document the practice of the "native" tailor of drawing "his pay by the month, and then absent himself every now and then on plea of sickness, all the while working for higher wages for some other family" (Hull & Mair, 1878, p. 131). Such absenteeism and appropriation of a permanent monthly salary could be read as infrapolitical resistance by a subaltern, which, though not invisible to the master, was beyond any open public register to be outrightly sanctioned.

The essence of distrust towards the "native" domestic help in general, and the *dhobie* in particular, is explicitly evident in the manuals, thereby indicating latent possibilities of infrapolitics. More often than not, the *dhobie* used to wash the garments of Anglo-Indians with those of Indians, thereby raising in the hygiene-conscious Anglo-Indians the fear of the possibilities of the spread of cholera and smallpox (Kingscote, 1893, p. 26; Steel & Gardiner, 1893, pp. 106-107). A similar instance of '*dhobie*-nuisance' is documented in *The English Baby in India* (Kingscote, 1893). Kingscote recalls an incident where she agreed to pay the *dhobie* an extra amount to wash their clothes in the colonial compound. The *dhobie*, however, upon accepting the offer, slyly sneaked in the garments of other households to wash them together. Not only did the author's racist untouchability agenda of keeping their family "safe from contamination" from the natives go astray, but she also was required to pay "twelve rupees extra a month" (Kingscote, 1893, p. 114). Kingscote even documented an incident where the favourite tablecloth of the *memsahib* was perhaps stolen by the *dhobie* and handed down to the cook, to let the latter use it as a comforter during smallpox (Kingscote, 1893, p. 115). The discovery of the same was in vain, for the *memsahib* was scared that her tablecloth was now exposed to a highly contagious disease. Such antics, perhaps, could be read as instances of infrapolitics that not only undermined colonial instruction but also exposed the colonisers to the perils of contagious diseases.

The hidden subversive tendencies of the *dhobie* also extended beyond scaring the colonisers with deadly diseases to ruining their intricately detailed outfits and making them unfit for use (Kingscote, 1893, p. 9). 'A Lady Resident' advised readers to seek the help of the *ayah* to wash sensitive garments since "collars, cuffs, and lace are utterly ruined if given to the common dhobie" (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 17). On the mutilation of British clothes, 'A Lady Resident' recalled an event where "a very expensive embroidered English frock returned after its first washing torn in a dozen places, and a pair of worked drawers with half the trimming torn off one leg and replaced by something of a different pattern" (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 60). The mutilation of British clothes was mostly due to the *dhobie's* renting the clothes "out to soldiers' wives and East Indian Women" (A Lady Resident, 1864, p. 60), thereby challenging the sartorial authenticity of the Anglo-Indians and making it consumable for mixed-race Indian women[20] (East Indian Women) Women are much lower in social rank.

Colonial sartorial culture was replete with indigenous resources and textiles, while the style was quintessentially European. The probable masked defiance of the Anglo-Indian sartorial culture by the *dirzie* and the *dhobie* was therefore a resistance to cultural hegemony. By deflating the sartorial ego of the empire, the subaltern displays a non-tangible cultural activism and demonstrates a passive dissent through discreet everyday practices subsuming subtle degrees of politicisation. Dressing can well be considered a situated bodily practice, and dressing is influenced by cultural values, personal identity, and the subject-in-the-dress's interaction with the surroundings. Hence, one can perceive dress in relation to social power and the way in which an individual orients social order. A Victorian colonialist's consumption habits of dress signal social-political power/capital within a cultural system. Any defacing of such embodied material identity is an indirect tarnishing of the identity of the consumer, here, the Anglo-Indians. The subversive acts attributed to *dirzies* in colonial India can be contextualised within the matrix of social marginalisation and economic exploitation they endured. Cast being inherently peripheral by colonial ethnographers like William Crooke, *dirzies* were seen as religiously unorthodox and occupationally impure—a view aligned with the colonial imperative to fix caste to profession (Lanzillo & Kumar, 2021). The syncretic practices—such as Sunni Muslim *dirzies* adopting Hindu

[20] Eurasian women born to European (usually British) fathers and Indian mothers

rituals or Hindu *dirzies* frequenting Sufi shrines—destabilised the colonial desire for rigid, legible social taxonomies, rendering them morally ambiguous and unworthy of caste recognition (Lanzillo & Kumar, 2021). This self-promulgated symbolic exclusion from caste hierarchies was compounded by material deprivation. William Hoey, License Tax Officer of Lucknow, recorded that tailors earned as little as 1½ annas per day—less than carpenters—marking them among the most underpaid workers in the colonial economy (Lanzillo & Kumar, 2021). Positioned at the juncture of invisibility and indispensability, *dirzies* perhaps negotiated their marginal status through infra-political subversion—minor stitching errors, delays, or understated insubordination functioned as veiled assertions of resistance.

In contrast, *dhobies*—mostly low-caste Hindus—were visibly embedded in colonial domestic logistics, yet were cast out by their own communities for consorting with the *mlechha*[21] British (Trautmann, 1997). Their indispensable role, from laundry to accompanying British camping tours, marked them as part of a "neatly labelled and skilled" service cohort (Channa, 2024, p. 46). This dual alienation—social ostracism and colonial servitude—created fertile ground for everyday resistance. Coupled with stagnant wage structures that remained unchanged for decades (Sinha, 2021), such caste and class tensions rendered their service fraught with latent dissent.

CONCLUSION

> "During the first half of the twentieth century, the struggle against British rule gradually became a mass movement involving large numbers of tribals, peasants, and women."
>
> (Rabbani & Mishra, 2023, p. 62)

Yet, such resistance manifested not solely in overt public contestations between the coloniser and the colonised, but also insidiously permeated the ostensibly apolitical site of the colonial domestic sphere. The Victorianized Anglo-Indian household, whose functionings were ordained by domestic manuals, more often than not may have been challenged from within by the "native" servants and their quotidian negotiatory practices. Our deconstructivist counter-reading of the selected Anglo-Indian domestic manuals, probing their aporias, reveals the presence of several infrapolitical practices exhibited by the "native" domestic helps. These 'hidden practices', often overlooked by Anglo-Indian expatriates, represent subtle acts of resistance and negotiation within the oppressive structure of colonialism. The study of such infrapolitical practices highlights the complex identities and subjectivities of the "native" servants. Beyond being passive subjects of colonial domination, they emerged as stealth-mode active agents, navigating and subverting the colonial order and the grand discourse of Victorian domesticity. Victorian Britishness in the colonial household was challenged by subtle acts of "native" resistance such as sly pilfering, intentional delays, selective obedience, or strategic incompetence. Such subaltern agency, compounded with the Anglo-Indians' fear of loss of authority and control within their private spaces, perhaps induced a steady colonial anxiety. This colonial anxiety, along with the complex interplay of power dynamics and "native" infrapolitics, constructed a complex coloniser-colonised race relationship in British India. Such insights compel a reassessment of British domesticity, which was an unstable, contested, and porous site where the colonial order was constantly undermined by minor insubordinations. The implications extend beyond household politics,

[21] Foreigners/Invaders who were outside the Vedic/Hindu dharma

highlighting how infrapolitics cumulatively unsettled the Anglo-Indian authority. Such acts, though subtle and often dismissed as inefficiencies or incompetence, functioned as persistent nuisances that exposed the fragility of colonial control. By challenging the smooth operation of the colonial domestic order, servants disrupted the very routines that underpinned British dominance. Over time, such micro-resistances coalesced into a silent yet potent form of defiance that undermined the ideological foundations of imperial rule.

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