Punkhawallahs: brutal insignia of British imperialism

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There is hardly much doubt that British imperialism gave rise to systematized structures of exploitation. 'Drain of wealth' was one such system which guzzled the material juice out of the Indian sub-continent. British imperialism was always adept at constructing facades of legitimacy behind which rampant exploitation went on unabated. Dehumanization of labour amidst the ostentatious display of the growing network of the (East India) Company Bahadur was an offshoot of those 'systematized structures of exploitation'.

Interestingly, after three decades of independence, in the 1980s and early 1990s' India, even if one was in urban areas, the experience of waving a moderate sized hand-made *punkha* or fan during long bouts of power failure was the norm. Along with lanterns, these *punkhas* gave us respite from the heat and humidity. However, it was hardly known to us then that a larger form of these *punkhas* was part of an institution in the Indian sub-continent even less than a century ago.

Punkha in Hindi means fan. Its root word is *pankh* - the wings of birds. The term *wallah (*in Hindi) refers to a bearer. Most commonly, in the 18th and 19th centuries, under the Imperial British Raj or for that matter under the East India Company rule, overhead fans suspended from the ceiling were operated using a cord or a pulley system. The *punkahwallahs* or the fan operators, manually moved large swinging fans suspended from

ceilings in homes and offices so as to provide relief to their British masters from the searing tropical heat.

In British India, Ceylon, British Malaya, among other colonies, *punkahwallahs* turned out to be a universal element of official and domestic colonial life. They were mentioned in letters written by the British administrators and planters. As Arunima Datta writes, travelogues, memoirs, paintings, sketch and even fictional works refer to the *punkahwallahs,* the chief among those was E.M. Forster's 1924 book *A Passage to India.*

Datta further tells us that the *punkahwallahs* became so popular in British India that the travel writer Sara Jeanette Duncan referred to them as an institution in her book, *A Social Departure.* Duncan wrote that while the *punkha* (fan) remained in sight, over the heads of the *memsahibs* (ladies) and *sahibs* (officers), inside their offices and rooms, the *wallah* (the bearer) on the other hand remained invisible, sitting outside the door of the room he served.

The Britishers generally maintained a physical distance between them and their servants. However, depending on the space and need, the *punkahwallahs* also used smaller fans, which incidentally brought them physically close to their patrons.

The backdrop

Nonetheless, neither the *punkhas* nor the *punkahwallahs* were inventions of the British in India. Both were prevalent long before the British arrived, as the servants of native nobles and kings, but the influx of the British led to a substantial increase in their numbers and consequent visibility, and more so as mentioned in the very outset, their 'systematization'. Moreover, keeping servants was a signature of extravagance in colonial as well pre-colonial Indian sub-continent. For instance, writes Simon Rastén, one of the wealthiest Indians in the Danish settlement of Serampore (in today's West Bengal, India) in the 19th century, the merchant and landowner Raghuram Goswami, had a retinue of 50 servants in his household. As if to compete with Goswami, Rajkrishno Dey — another influential merchant of Serampore — had 49 servants. Lakshmi Subramanian in her chapter 'Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-century Surat: Readings from a Colonial Archive' writes:

"We do not have too many descriptions of how households actually functioned or how servants were recruited and retained. If we presume that aristocratic households, both Muslim and Rajput, by and large followed the guidelines of princely Mughal household establishments, one could quite legitimately surmise that such households of some repute maintained large retinues of servants and slaves."

Returning however to the specific case of *punkhawallahs*, it is noteworthy what Ritam Sengupta writes:

"The mechanical device widely known in British India as the punkah was not unique to the period of colonial rule in the region. Mughal-era establishments certainly had some use of this ceiling-mounted contrivance. The traveler Peter Mundy noted the presence of 'the great artificial fanne of linen which hanges downe from aloft' at Shah Jahan's court in Agra where he was visiting in 1632."

Though discrediting the East India Company official to have so-called 'invented' the punkha, Sengupta nonetheless agrees to the point that "it is still quite difficult to deny that colonial settlers in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India seemed to have reinvented the use of the device on the most exaggerated scale against those mighty foes — the scorching sun and the suffocating humidity of tropical India."

At the other end, as per Datta's work, initially, some British administrators experimented with the employment of natives as *punkhawallahs,* convicted of petty crime in various domestic roles. Serving as a *punkahwallah* was supposedly one of the options open to them for redemption. But as increasing numbers of women and children moved to British India, this policy was no longer adhered to as it was felt unsafe allowing convicts access to private spaces.

Punkahwallah operating a large ceiling fan, from Charles D'Oyly's The European in India, 1813 © Bridgeman Images

The majority of *punkahwallahs* were either boys or old men, usually from the lower castes, writes Datta. Some sources however, include references to able-bodied adult men serving as *punkahwallahs*. In *A Passage to India*, Forster describes a *punkahwallah's* presence in a court room scene:

> *The first person Adela noticed in it was the humblest of all who were present, a person who had no bearing officially upon the trial: the man who pulled the punkah. Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back, in the middle of the central gangway, and he caught her attention as she came in, and he seemed to control the proceedings.*

Sengupta mentions the case of naval surgeon James Johnson's ideas. Johnson categorized the *punkha* and the palanquin as "rational enjoyments" that were "rendered necessary by the great difference between a temperate and torrid zone." Together with them, he also classed in this category, "the numerous retinue of domestics, anticipating (our) every wish".

The pullers and their tormentors

According to James Johnson, the famed palanquin carriers, the "balasore-bearers" were considered to be naturally endowed for service as they could "go through three times as much fatigue…as would kill an Englishman outright".

'Balasore bearers' were a group of Odiya palki/palanquin carriers in early-colonial Calcutta who while providing their services for public transport also often doubled up as privately employed domestic aids, informs Sengupta. Led by a set of chiefs, these Odiya migrants were known for their organized character and their collective bargaining capacity.

Sengupta says that the English East India Company found it difficult to control the erratic hiring rates of the 'Balasore bearers'. Furthermore, their untimely unavailability during pilgrimage seasons was another matter of concern. When working in private capacity as servants or palki/palanquin carriers, Odiya workers, as Balthazar Solvyns noted, frequently quoted religious rules set by their chiefs so as to refuse services. This reluctance to carry out certain kinds of tasks in European homes extended as a natural corollary to the new requirement of punkha-pulling, notes Sengupta.

During the day, writes Datta, the *punkahwallahs* operated the *punkhas* using their hands, but at night they tied the rope to their feet so that they could perform the task while almost asleep.

Also, Datta quotes Reverend Z.F. Griffin's 1903 work 'In *India and Daily Life in Bengal'* (1903):

> *The punka wallah is not an unalloyed blessing. We often have such a trial with him that we think we will get along without him, but a day of such an experience causes us to decide to choose the least of two evils ... We retire at ten o'clock, when we lie down with our thin night suit on, and the punka starts. We are comparatively comfortable … we go to sleep.*
>
> *By and by we awake with a feeling of suffocation, and we find our clothes wet with sweat and the punka standing still. Then we call out, 'Punka tannow!' which is an order to pull the punka. It may move, and may not. If it does not, we get up and take hold of the rope and give it a pull … He suddenly comes to the conclusion that he has been sleeping, and begins to pull most vigorously. It may be he pulls so hard to convince us that he has been wide awake all the time. At all events, he now pulls so hard that the breeze on our damp night clothes makes us feel chilly, and we must call out to him to pull more slowly.*

In the early nineteenth century, Sengupta mentions that alongside the Odiya servants, possibly Muslim attendants,

refused to pull the *punkha* over a table serving beef or pork. Other complaints were that *punkahwallahs* often played dumb and did not want to understand the orders of their patrons. In *A Social Departure,* Sara Jeannette Duncan recorded an English memsahib's encounters in Calcutta with her *punkhawallah* who often played dumb and pretended not to understand whether she wanted them to fan gently or harder or stop.

As described by Datta, there were instances when the sahib had papers and manuscripts lying across the table, and the *punkhawallah* fanned harder, causing papers to fly in all directions. Following such incidents, when the master shouted at the *punkhawallah* to slow or stop the *punkha*, he allegedly increased the speed of the fan:

> *You are in a hurry, you have lots to do, you are hot from your chase after the first piece of paper, and in your anger you literally yell to the man to stop; but the doors are closed, he has a good excuse, pretending he thinks you wish him to pull harder, he increases his strength and pulls like a Hercules, until the ropes creak again and your valuable papers fly in graceful eddies to the ceiling.*

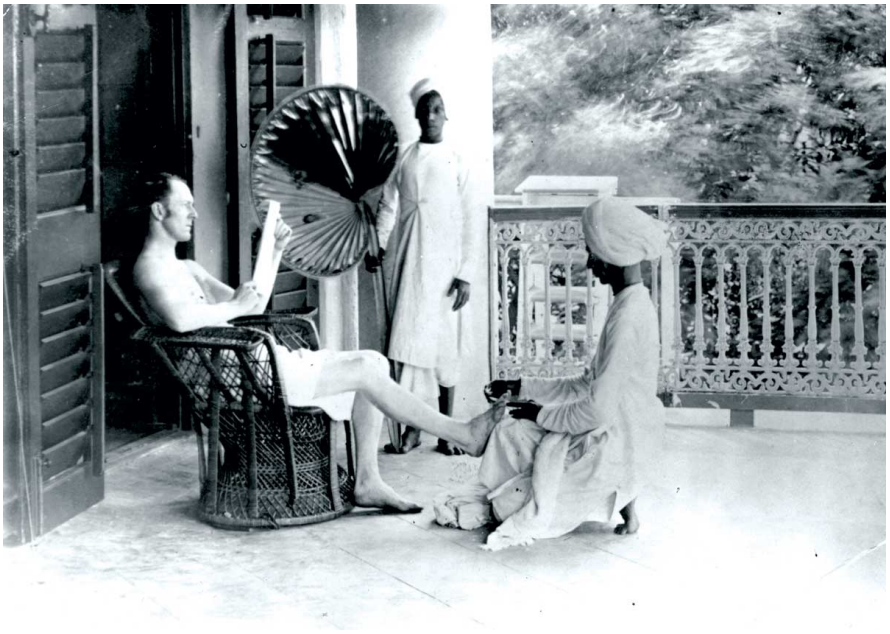
Such stories suggest that *punkhawallahs* might have used the language barrier as a ruse for deliberate acts of resistance against his British master, opines Datta.

Sengupta states that the demand for *punkha* labour grew remarkably over the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, in erstwhile Calcutta, this demand was met by steady streams of relatively lower caste migrant populations — like Kahars, Rajwars, Dusadhs from Bihar and eastern United Provinces, certain Muslim communities from Bengal districts and Gwalas from Odissa — assembling in the city every 'hot weather' season (usually between March and October). And with the extension of the work of punkha-pulling during night, the puller was not allowed entry into the private spaces. Consequently, as Sengupta opines, the punkha-pullers were relegated as the "half naked wretches" beyond the pale of ordinary servant class — in a sense the *punkhawallahs* were the 'subalterns among the Subalterns'.

Another common complaint, as Datta notes, was that *punkahwallahs* often fell asleep on the job. Several stories, letters, memoirs, reports in magazines and even postcards were produced capturing the inconveniences caused by sleeping *punkhawallahs*.

In February 1891, *The Graphic* recorded a story, wherein the sahib called all his household servants to beat up his sleeping *punkhawallah* to teach him a lesson. The *Atlantic Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science, Art and Politics* of 1866 noted that British teachers in Indian colleges and even some missionaries employed *punkhawallahs*, whose sleepiness annoyed the patrons, 'forcing' them to be abusive towards their servants.

For instance, James Kerr, who was reported to be of amiable nature, was 'forced' to become abusive when he repeatedly found his *punkhawallah* sleeping on duty. Kerr was often found abusing his sleeping *punkhawallahs* using terms such as *suar* (pig), *banchut* and *junglee-wallahs* (uncivilised beings), as well as bumping their heads against the wall, writes Datta.



A British officer receiving a pedicure while a punkahwallah stands nearby, c.1900 © Hulton/Getty Images

Shouting and hitting *punkhawallahs* with slippers, splashing them with water were usual. At times, violence could also be extreme.

George Atkinson wrote that boots, slippers, a racquet, even a chair, were kept for disciplining the *punkhawallahs*. And if these objects did not serve to keep him awake, there was the

option of a direct personal assault — kicks and punches, often hurled repeatedly.

On 14 February 1882, *Madras Mail* reported the case of a British tea planter in Assam, a certain Mr Fox, who had struck his *punkhawallah* for sleeping on duty, which led to the latter's death. In the North West Provincial High Court of British India it was argued that, under normal circumstances, the striking would not have killed the *punkhawallah*. But as the *punkahwallah* already had an enlarged spleen, of which Mr Fox was not aware, it had fatal consequences. Based on this argument, Fox was let off with one month of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of 200 rupees.

Similarly, in 1893, John Rigby was fined 100 rupees by the Government of Oudh for striking his *punkhawallah* for failing to perform duties. The wounds sustained from the strikes later caused the death of the hapless *punkhawallah*, but it was justified that the death was not intended by the patron and, had the *punkhawallah* been healthy, he would have been able to withstand the 'slight strikes'.

What next in history?

Ironically, mainstream nationalist or even Marxist historiography has somehow seemed to have omitted the narrative on the *punkhawallahs*. Even subaltern historiography championed in the 1980s by Ranajit Guha et al in their ten volumes does not touch upon the *punkhawallahs.* In their work, a chapter on concubines come up, along with obviously, studies on tribals, peasants, industrial workers and peasants. Nonetheless, unraveling the details of the *punkahwallahs* and similar groups of individuals like *coolies*, *aayas, chowkidars, palanquin bearers* is sure to shed light on our deeper understanding of the exploitative apparatus of the British Raj in the sub-continent in particular and imperialism in general.

It is however encouraging to note that on a global level historical scholarship has witnessed an increasing number of studies on domestic servants. Raffaella Sarti has provided a

summary, whereas the two volume work titled Servants' Pasts offer several insights into the issues.

With a primary exposition on the *punkhawallahs* in British India by historians like Arunima Datta and Ritam Sengupta, the stage is set for subaltern historiography to do more research and bring to public discourse the story of the 'unread' and the 'unheard'. The *punkhawallahs and their compatriots* cannot and should not remain in oblivion. The historical invisibility needs to be breached. It is high time we knew if the *punkhawallahs* or for that matter *coolies*, *aayas*, *chowkidars* et al. were just mute subjects in the historical palimpsest or possessed an agency or may the truth lay somewhere in between.

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References/Notes

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