

CHRISTMAS IN INDIA

The drawing shows a scene of domestic life in 19th century India / under the Raj*, that is, when India was under British rule, part of the British Empire ... We can see a family of five, on the veranda of a vast bungalow, living an existence that seems both contented and luxurious... The father is dozing in a cane armchair, or seems to be suffering from the heat while the mother is reading a long letter or a review... Judging by the way these people are dressed and the number of servants, we can suppose that the father is an important civil servant or a businessman... They are surrounded by numerous native servants who are obviously at their beck and call and entirely devoted to them, running the household and taking care of the children...

Each servant seems to have a very precise function... One of them is fanning the sahib, the memsahib and two of the children (the little memsahibs) with a punkah** while another one (the bearer) is bringing some refreshment... In the background, a young Indian woman, probably the nanny, is looking after the baby...

When looking at the picture, we are struck by several things: first of all, we have the feeling that apart from the ethnic origin of the servants and the environment outside, this family's life seems to be a replica of the sort of life upper middle-class people lived in England at that time... As a matter of fact, despite the heat, the British family has made a point of being formally dressed, as if they were intent on giving a faultless image of themselves / as if they were playing a part... What is striking too is the way the servants perform their various tasks in a very natural way... There is no outward sign of hostility between masters and servants and the roles are clearly defined and accepted: the master-servant relationship is obviously in the nature of things... Last, but not least, this drawing makes us aware of the nature of everyone's role... In those days the British were wealthy, powerful masters who expected the Indians to obey and serve them... The Indians were regarded as aliens in a land that definitely belonged to Britain and their main function was to ease their masters' lives and help them increase their fortune...

* the Raj : the British government in India before 1947.

** punkah : a fan made of palm leaves; a rope was attached to it and a servant made the fan move the air.

British colonists had an average of 7 servants: there was usually a cook and a gardener, and several cleaners. Dalit (untouchable) boys and girls did the dirtiest jobs.