

WOMEN
of the
RAJ



MARGARET MACMILLAN

WOMEN *of the* RAJ

The Mothers, Wives and Daughters
of the British Empire in India

New Edition

With 56 illustrations

 **Thames & Hudson**

Frontispiece Christmas at Madras, at the height of the Raj. As the great *punkah* fan swings overhead, the memsahib, flanked by her two young children, is presented with the ceremonial Christmas pudding.

To Bob

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Margaret MacMillan

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1

THE VOYAGE OUT

Englishwomen – and Welsh and Scots and Irish women – had been going to India for generations by the time the Raj reached its peak in the late nineteenth century. The first to make the voyage may have been a Mrs Hudson and her maid, Frances Webb, who went in 1617 as companions to an Armenian lady who had been born in India. (Frances had a love affair on the voyage, unwittingly setting the pattern for countless women who came after her.) Over the years, India drew a few women looking for work – as milliners, perhaps, or governesses. And some women had a calling to be missionaries. Others simply went because they had been summoned back by their families after an education in Britain.

The great majority, however, went to India because their husbands were there or because they hoped to find husbands for themselves. (To keep them chaste for the marriage market, unmarried women travelled, until well into the twentieth century, under the care of chaperones, usually married women who were making the voyage anyway.) The ‘fishing fleet’, as it was known unkindly but accurately by the nineteenth century, arrived in India in the autumn at the start of the cold weather. One lady who came out in 1779 divided what she called ‘the speculative ladies’ into old maids, ‘of the shrivelled and dry description’, and girls, ‘educated merely to cover the surface of their mental deformity’. The odds were that their fishing would meet success: throughout the period of British rule in India, European men outnumbered European women by about three to one.

Understandably, few British women had cared to come to the unsettled India of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and, what is more, the early charters of the East India Company pointedly forbade women on its posts. Its employees ignored that regulation as they did so many others. They took Indian mistresses; worse, from the point of view of the Company’s staunch Protestant directors, they married Catholics, daughters or widows of the Portuguese. To save the souls of its men, the Company, for a time, played matchmaker. In the later part

of the seventeenth century it shipped batches of young women from Britain to India. The cargo, divided into ‘gentlewomen’ and ‘others’, were given one set of clothes each and were supported for a year – quite long enough, it was thought, for them to find themselves husbands. Some did not; and the Company tried to deny that it had any obligation to look after them further. Most unfairly it also warned them to mind their morals: ‘Whereas some of these women are grown scandalous to our nation, religion and Government interest,’ said a letter from London to the Deputy Governor of Bombay in 1675, ‘we require you to give them fair warning that they do apply themselves to a more sober and Christian conversation.’ If that warning did not have the right effect, the women were to be fed on bread and water and shipped back to Britain. The experiment was not a happy one and it must have been with relief that the Company abandoned the practice in the eighteenth century. British women still travelled to India but they came individually.

The voyage was a dreadful one. The wooden sailing vessels, tiny by today’s standards, were tossed about in every storm – and the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean were famous for their storms. The passengers faced at best being thrown about in their cabins, at worst drowning. The Reverend Hobart Caunter recorded one such storm, which took place off the east coast of India in the 1830s. The weather began to turn foul early one morning. ‘The only lady among us every now and then expressed her fears, when a sudden gust caused the vessel to lurch with an increased momentum, as if the billows were already commencing a fiercer conflict.’ By late afternoon, they were in the midst of a full-blown hurricane. The ship pitched violently and furniture was torn from its fastenings. More dangerously, a cannon got loose and threatened to batter a hole in the side. Even Caunter, a seasoned traveller, found the noise, coupled with the crashing of waves and the howling of the wind, ‘painful in the extreme’. Night came on and the storm increased in fury. As Caunter and the captain were in the main cabin, or cuddy, trying to carry on a conversation, ‘suddenly, a heavy sea struck her astern, but happily on the quarter, and in an instant carried away the quarter-galley on that side, swamping the cabin into which the poor lady before spoken of had retired for the night. The force of the water was so great, that it dashed open the door of the cabin, and its fair occupant was borne head foremost into the cuddy, dripping like a mermaid, her hair hanging

about her shoulders in thin strips, when she was rescued by the captain from further mischief. She was drenched to the skin.'

At its shortest the voyage under sail took under two months; at its longest well over six. Sometimes the winds were so contrary on the west coast of Africa that the ships were blown off course almost to Brazil. The crew and passengers gasped with the heat; then, when they were rounding the Cape of Good Hope, they shivered in the cold. There was the danger of being dashed against the shore by a sudden shift in the winds. Those who survived often ended up in the great slave markets along the east coast of Africa. Occasionally the winds might fail altogether and the unhappy ship would sit becalmed for weeks on end.

Accommodations were cramped and dirty and often had to be shared with huge rats which scurried about, boldly eating any food that was left out and nibbling holes in clothing. Women who could afford it had cabins above decks. Otherwise they were housed below, in stuffy cubby holes, often with walls made of canvas, where they had very little privacy. A bucket of salt water was the closest passengers got to a wash tub; another bucket made do for a toilet. Mrs Sherwood, later famous as a writer of sentimental children's stories, accompanied her army officer husband out to India at the beginning of the nineteenth century; she had to sleep in a hammock strung above a cannon while filthy water from the bilges ran across the floor beneath.

Mrs Eliza Fay, who lived in India in the late eighteenth century, endured the voyage several times. Fortunately she was a woman who faced difficulties (and she had many – from imprisonment by an Indian ruler to her wastrel of a husband) in an optimistic spirit. Her letters to her sister are filled with cheerful gossip and appalling details of shipboard life. On one voyage back to England, she nearly suffocated. 'The port of my cabin being kept almost constantly shut, and the door opening into the steerage; I had neither light nor air but from a scuttle.' On her first voyage the captain was 'overbearing and insolent' and kept his passengers half starved. At meals, Mrs Fay reported proudly, 'the longest arm fared best; and you cannot imagine what a good scrambler I am become'.

When they could, women on the sailing ships escaped from their cabins to the fresh air of the deck, but that depended on both the weather and the mood of the captain. Many of the captains of the East Indiamen were quite charmingly eccentric on dry land; at sea they seemed half

mad and one of their more common phobias was women. Ladies were often forced to take their meals in their cabins rather than in the cuddy because the gentlemen drank and swore so dreadfully. Mrs Sherwood confided to her diary that 'those who have not been at sea can never conceive the hundredth part of the horrors of a long voyage to a female in a sailing vessel.'

At the start of the voyage, there might be the luxury of fresh meat, because many ships carried cows and sheep on deck. Sooner or later, rations would get shorter, the preserved meat tougher and saltier. Water would turn the colour of strong tea, with a foul smell and an even fouler taste. Minnie Blane, a happy, sheltered young middle-class girl from Bath, experienced all the unpleasantness of sailing ships when she travelled out to India in 1856 with her husband, an officer in the Indian Army. (They might have taken the shorter route overland via Egypt and enjoyed the relative comfort of steamships but her husband needed to save money.) Minnie, who was pregnant, was sick a good deal of the time and the meals she faced cannot have helped. For weeks on end, after they had rounded the Cape, the only meat was 'Pork, boiled, roasted, fried, chops, curry (with so much garlic in it, it is quite uneatable), and one leg of mutton, half raw'. The butter was thick with salt and sugar had long since run out. Some food was quite rotten. 'I cannot tell you', wrote Minnie to her mother, 'how sick it made me one day, on cutting open a fig, to see three or four large white maggots lying comfortably inside!' Cautious travellers often took a private stock of food and wine. Many women brought other little comforts along in a brave attempt to make their quarters bearable. They had their own folding chairs, washstands, linen, and even chintz curtains to hang across the door.

Soldiers' wives had the worst time of all. The Army's own troopships were appalling – leaking, dirty, and cramped – and the transports it sometimes had to hire from private contractors were scarcely better. Since the usual class distinctions were rigidly observed at sea, officers' ladies at least got cabins; 'wives of others ranks', as the Army described them, were below decks, often in a corner of the hold next to the horses. There they endured the voyage, sleeping, eating and passing their days in a stench which got worse as the voyage dragged on. Unless they were working for an officer's wife, they had little opportunity of getting on deck.

The military authorities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not approve of women and their children accompanying the troops – only a few of the families of the ranks were permitted to go – so they did little to make them comfortable. The Army gave them a pittance for their subsistence but no advice on what to bring with them. Mrs Helen Mackenzie, the strong-minded and pious wife of an officer in a Sikh regiment, was horrified on her first voyage to India in the middle of the nineteenth century to discover a soldier's wife eating the scraps from her plate. The unfortunate woman was 'worse off than a female convict': she did not even have adequate clothing.

Gradually the Army was forced to modify its attitude; by the twentieth century wives usually accompanied their husbands abroad and the troopships, while never luxurious, gave them at least decent food and accommodation. After the First World War, conditions were better still; the Army even provided free baby food on board ship.

It is not surprising that passengers on those early voyages in sailing ships vented their misery and boredom in violent quarrels with each other. The men threatened each other with duels; the women gossiped viciously and absurdly cut each other dead. Every now and then there were more agreeable moments. If it was calm, the passengers danced on the deck under the stars. They celebrated 'crossing the line', when male passengers who had never crossed the equator before were ceremonially shaved by Neptune and his court. The biggest sailors played Mrs Neptune and her daughters. The gentlemen were shaved with a saw and a tar brush and ducked in a tub of salt water while the ladies watched from a safe distance. Mrs Ashmore, the prim wife of an officer, witnessed the merriment when she travelled out to India in 1840, though the scene 'soon became of too riotous a nature to admit of our remaining witnesses to it'. (She retired to her favourite reading – the works of Bishop Berkeley and Volney's *Ruins of Empire*.)

Occasionally (and not always by design) the ships put in briefly to shore. St Helena in the South Atlantic was a popular spot to pick up provisions and water. The passengers could stretch their legs briefly; if they had time they might make a trip to Napoleon's tomb (at least until the bones were restored to the French in 1840). The Cape of Good Hope was another regular stop. The ships tied up at Simonstown, then a pretty little fishing village, and passengers hired carriages to take them

to Constantia, where there were excellent local wines, and to Cape Town with its charming houses set in tidy gardens. The Dutch settlers, various ladies noted approvingly, preserved both the simple ways and the hospitality of their ancestors.

There was a much shorter way of getting to India, by boat across the Mediterranean, then by land across the narrow strip of Egypt that divided the Mediterranean from the Red Sea, and finally by boat again across the Indian Ocean. This route was first used in the eighteenth century and was eventually to supplant the one around the Cape. At first it presented as many hazards as the longer route, because Egypt, nominally under the control of the Ottoman Sultan, was quite lawless. Passengers for India gathered in Cairo until they were a large enough party to defy the bandits who lay in wait in the desert. Sometimes they joined forces with Egyptian merchants heading in the same direction. The caravans travelled with an escort of hired Arab soldiers. The men generally rode while the ladies were jolted about in a sort of litter, slung between two camels. In spite of a canopy and blinds, the unfortunate occupants nearly stifled in the heat of the day only to shudder in the sudden chill of the desert night. Mrs Fay, who travelled in one of these in the 1770s, remembered with particular antipathy 'the frequent violent jerks, occasioned by one or other of the poles slipping out of its wretched fastening, so as to bring one end of the litter to the ground'. In later years, men and women bounced together across the desert in crude horse-drawn vans; later still there was a railway.

The journey became much safer and much faster as the nineteenth century wore on. In 1830 the first steamer was put into service between Suez, at the head of the Red Sea, and Bombay. In 1840, the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company signed an agreement with the government of India to provide a regular service between Suez and certain Indian ports. The P&O was in time to become almost synonymous with the journey to India, but there were other lines: the Anchor and the Clan Lines, which ran between Liverpool and Bombay, the Calcutta Star Line between Liverpool and Colombo, and (generally considered by the British inferior to all these) the Italian Rubatino Line from Genoa and Naples to Bombay. Steam and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 helped to shorten the trip to four weeks and even less and the whole experience became rather enjoyable. The author of *Indian Outfits*,

a guide for women published in 1882, was quite rhapsodic. 'To those who like the sea, the voyage is very pleasant; there are generally many nice people on board, and, if troops are carried, sometimes a band, and on fine nights dancing on deck, or singing, glee parties, and so on; very often amateur theatricals are got up, and come off the night before port is reached. There is usually a library on board, and there is no reason why, with so much that is new to interest and with pleasant society, the time should not pass quickly and agreeably.'

The marked improvement in communications between Europe and India meant that more women were able to travel out. By the end of the nineteenth century, the trip had developed its own rules. Old hands booked cabins on the side facing north to avoid the heat of the sun: Port Out, Starboard Home – and so, one explanation goes, 'posh' came into the language. Baggage was labelled 'Baggage Room' (for pieces not needed at all on the voyage), 'Present Use Baggage Room' (where the owners had access every day at a fixed time), and 'Cabin'. The guide-books recommended that ladies' Cabin Baggage include a chintz bag for dirty clothes and a provision basket with such comforts as biscuits, Bovril, whisky or brandy, and a spirit lamp for brewing up cups of tea. (There must have been some accidents because many liners would not allow either spirit lamps or curling tongs.) Passengers should also take a patent medicine such as chlorodyne for aches and pains. And, *Indian Outfits* informed its readers, 'a bottle of essence of Jamaica ginger ... is good for sea sickness.' (The P&O line thoughtfully provided grey-and-scarlet cardboard boxes for those passengers whom no remedy helped.) Clothes posed a problem because of the changes in climate. The general rule, said *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* – compiled in the late nineteenth century by two women of the Raj, Flora Annie Steel (see pp. 242–43) and Grace Gardiner – with an excruciating pun, was a tweed costume for 'Homi-cide' and light dresses for 'Suez-cide'. To get around the difficulties of doing laundry on board, sensible ladies took their oldest underwear and nightdresses along and simply threw them out the portholes when they were soiled.

Most passengers for India travelled the whole distance from Britain by boat, but some, to shorten the journey, went by train across France or down through Italy to catch a steamer to Egypt. The departures, whether from a railway station or dockside, gave those going to India for the first

time a preview of British society out there. So small was the British community in India that old hands spotted friends and acquaintances among the crowd; they chatted with each other in an English peppered with strange words. The novices also began to realize the pain that the British Empire in India caused to those who worked for it. There were sad leave-takings, mothers saying goodbye to their children who were staying at Home to be educated, families seeing off, perhaps for years on end, one of their own. 'No one', wrote Pamela Hinkson, a writer who went to India in the 1930s, 'had told me about the cord that goes with one as far as Port Said, seeming to link one with the country and life one has left; stretching as the boat moves on, but always tugging at one's heart as if to prevent one turning one's face forwards, to go on, a free person – East.'

On the way across the Mediterranean, the ships sometimes stopped for twenty-four hours to take on coal at Malta, where 'the coral, silver, and lace shops in the Strada Reale are very tempting', and ladies who were not squeamish could visit the 'pickled monks' – embalmed members of the Carmelite Order. The first really 'oriental' stop on the way was Port Said. Women went ashore carefully escorted, because the city was said to be full of cut-throats of all nationalities. They were followed about by motley crowds of beggars, little boys, fortune-tellers, and locals trying to show them conjuring tricks. In the twentieth century, in a well-known shop run by a Chinese, they could buy embroidery or porcelain or perhaps a pair of japanned vases for their future homes. The famous Simon Arzt stocked everything from topis to Turkish delight to the striped shawls which were to be seen on memsahibs all over India. (Old hands back on board were fond of telling novice travellers that they had paid too much.)

Some travellers took the overland route across Egypt even after the Suez Canal had opened, and they might do some sightseeing in Cairo or Alexandria. *Indian Outfits* recommended hiring a dragoman as guide 'from among the yelling horde who surround you directly on landing'. There was a good deal worth visiting – Pompey's Pillar, for example, and the Khedive's Palace, where 'very good taste is displayed in general'.

The Suez Canal route was less wearing, but not nearly so interesting. The town of Ismailia offered few distractions beyond the 'bumboats' which came out to sell a strangely assorted cargo of shoes, black bread,

onions and monkeys. Passengers could amuse themselves by throwing coppers to the boys who ran alongside begging. At the southern end of the Canal was the dreary town of Suez, where the only amusement was donkey rides on beasts with names like 'Lily Langtry' and 'the Archbishop of Canterbury'.

The Red Sea was, surprisingly, a beautiful blue. But, warned the author of *Indian Outfits*, 'In it one is sure to be hot, and if there is any breeze it is sure to be the wrong one.' By now it was getting hotter day by day; the ladies brought out their summer clothing, the gentlemen (in the twentieth century) started to wear shorts, and the staff went into white uniforms. The hot broth served at eleven in the morning disappeared, to be replaced by ices and melons.

As the ship sailed on down the Red Sea, those passengers who were of a religious turn of mind could amuse themselves by trying to pick out the mountains described in the Old Testament. Most were far too busy. Sudden close friendships formed and of course there were romances, watched with amusement or disapproval by the older ladies. 'We felt nervous', reported Pamela Hinkson, 'about some of the young ladies going out to be married. They were divided into two classes, those who sat alone dreaming and those who made the most of their last fling.' Shipboard life after Port Said was an endless round of activity. In the 1930s Dennis Kincaid, who wrote one of the best books on British society in India, heard a lady declare: 'The only way to travel is by British liners, because of the lovely organized games.' When Ethel Savi, the wife of an estate manager in north India and a novelist of Anglo-India, went by the P&O's *Viceroy of India* in 1929, she discovered that the games deck with its shuffle board, quoits, and deck tennis was 'easily the most popular spot on the ship'. Besides the games there were concerts where passengers and crew would give recitations or sing and fancy dress balls with prizes for the best costumes – perhaps a young lady disguised as a plum pudding or a hearty young man as Cupid. The novices found themselves pressured to join in all the jollity, yet another foretaste of life in India.

By this stage, the passengers had sorted themselves out, the hearty enjoying themselves loudly and energetically, the serious-minded talking quietly in corners of the ship. For women who were new to India, shipboard life also revealed that deeply engrained Anglo-Indian love of hierarchy. Within hours of departure, the elites from the Indian Civil

Service and the Indian Army had found each other; planters gathered to drink hard and play hard; and missionaries were shunned by common consent. In the large cabins which several women shared, the senior lady took the best berth.

The last port of call before India was Aden, uncomfortably wild and austere with no green to soften its rocks. And the natives were 'rough, wild-looking creatures, with shocks of red or yellow hair'. After Aden, the weather became hotter still. The Southern Cross now glowed in the sky at night, and the ships left a silver trail of phosphorus in their wake. During the day whales and porpoises raced alongside. When it became unbearably hot, some passengers had their bedding taken out to the decks. The ladies slept on one side of the deck, the men on the other, with a sail rigged up between them for decency's sake; at bedtime and in the mornings, a signal warned the men to avert their eyes while the ladies trooped by.

For those making the journey for the first time, it was all very exciting. Monica Campbell-Martin crossed the Indian Ocean in the 1920s on her way to India with her husband and tiny daughter. She was young and enthusiastic and she was fascinated by the tropics. 'All day long the flying fish swept past like fairy rapiers. Always there was a concerted upsurge of glistening backs, then a cloud of silvery needles shot through the air. Swiftly they pierced the waves again without a splash, only to be followed by another school in gleaming horizontal flight. We slept on deck, for only a salamander could have felt comfortable in the cabins. Going to bed on deck could scarcely be called "sleeping". In the small hours, later arrivals stepped over us or on us. At dawn we were roused by the washing of the decks with powerful jets of water from a hose. But I forgave the tropics their heat for the sake of those magnificent starry nights.'

As they got closer to India, sharp-nosed passengers claimed that they could smell the land. (It was a favourite joke to deceive the new arrivals by rubbing a foul-smelling substance on the rails.) The last night on board was always an uneasy one, as passengers said goodbye to friends or perhaps lovers they had not known a month previously. Some women faced a return mixed with sadness as they thought of the children left behind. For the young girls who had been born in India but educated at Home, there was the sudden sense of familiarity, the

rush of recollections that had faded during the long cold years away. And for the women coming out to India for the first time, there was the apprehension of arrival in a strange land. Would they be met? Would they recognize their fiancés? How would they fit in? Shipboard life had given them a taste of the society they were going to meet in India, with its gregariousness, its passion for games, and its strong sense of hierarchy. Now they had to come to terms with India as well.

2

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Whether they came by sailing ship in the eighteenth century or by steamship in the twentieth, the first impressions the new arrivals had of India were almost always similar. The noise, the smells, the colour – and the people in all their dazzling variety. Women's recollections of that initial encounter also reveal an undercurrent of panic. After the enclosed world of the ships, India was too big, too untidy, too crowded – in fact, too much India.

The smell was the first thing they noticed. Even before they landed, a whiff of India was borne out to them on the breeze. India has a smell so much its own that even the faintest echo of it somewhere else can bring a sudden strong nostalgia. All hot countries have scents unfamiliar to noses from northern countries: garlic, cooking oil, pungent tobaccos. India adds dust and the tang of spices – chillies, turmeric, ginger, cloves; the scent of jasmine and sandalwood; and the acrid smoke of burning cow dung.

From the first, too, the newcomers' eyes were assaulted by the colours, on the people and in the streets. As Pamela Hinkson's P&O liner docked in Bombay in the 1930s, she leaned on the rail and gazed at the pier. 'A group of women in *saris* made one think that they must be colour-blind. Orange, red, yellow, pink, blue and mauve were mixed together, all of the brightest shades.' Mrs Guthrie, an endlessly inquisitive and energetic Englishwoman who visited India in the 1870s, was less censorious. On her first drive through Bombay, she admired Parsee women 'walking about in short satin skirts of the most brilliant hues – an exquisite pale cherry and an emerald green appeared to be their favourite colours – flowers were in their glossy black hair, and they wore quantities of gold lace and handsome ornaments'.

Then there were the noises. The liquid syllables of different Indian languages lapped about the women. Bullock carts, which were everywhere, creaked along on squeaking axles. Horses clattered by with their carriages. The birds known as the seven sisters because they always fly in