



## Mussaul: The Bearer of Light

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to discuss the occupation and the gradual disappearance of mussaul or mussaulchis in the context of colonial India. After describing the image of domestic servants as a necessary evil in colonial accounts, the paper puts forth various mentions of mussaulchis and how their employment became rudimentary with the coming of electrical technologies.

**Keywords:** Mussaul, Mussualchi, electrification, lamp handler, Anglo-Indian establishments, domestic servants.

The electrification of colonial urban India in the late nineteenth and the early 20th century brought about a plethora of changes, not just in the sphere of infrastructure, but also in the societal structure. One of the many professions which was lost as a result of this fast paced transformation was that of the Mussaul.

In order to understand the position of mussauls, we need to first look into the importance of servants in an Anglo-Indian establishments. The British viewed themselves as imperial people, as those who had been charged with the governance of others. Thomas Metcalf argued that initially, the British devised two divergent strategies to justify their authority: one defined the essential characteristics which the Indians shared with the British themselves, while the other emphasised the presumed qualities of enduring 'difference'. Over time, however, the differences- of history, race, gender, and society- became predominant.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the domestic sphere, for British residents of India, was a "significant space intended to both constitute and to express the culture of an imperial power", and Indian servants within the Anglo-Indian household played an important role in the affirmation of the Anglo-Indians' position as rulers.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of electrification often made several references to replacing existing mechanisms or methods with more "modern" electrical

technologies. This involved constructing concerns about the character of the urban poor most closely associated with the everyday lives of the British and the Indian middle class: the domestic servant<sup>3</sup>, one of whom was the mussaul, also sometimes referred to as mussaulchi.

For the British residents in India, home was assigned as a 'significant space intended to both constitute and to express the culture of an imperial power', and Indian servants within the Anglo-Indian household played an important role in the affirmation of the Anglo-Indians' position as rulers.<sup>4</sup> Servants, however, occupied an uncertain position within the home; they were

<sup>1</sup> Metcalf, Thomas. *The New Cambridge History Of India III.4 Ideologies Of The Raj*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Robin. *Interiors of Empire: Objects, Space and Identity Within the Indian Subcontinent, c. 1800-1947*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee, Animesh. "New Wine in New Bottles": *Class Politics and the "Uneven Electrification" of Colonial India in History of Retailing and Consumption*, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Robin. *Interiors of Empire: Objects, Space and Identity Within the Indian Subcontinent, c. 1800-1947*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007.

seen as an unwanted necessity. While their presence helped reaffirm the superior identity of their masters, and establish and maintain imperial domesticity, they were also seen as outsiders.<sup>5</sup>

The mussaulchi was the person who used to be responsible for lighting oil lamps across tents, or in households, maintaining, polishing, and carrying them to places. Edward Hamilton Aitken described the mussaul as "the man of lamps"<sup>6</sup>. However, alongside this, they also performed miscellaneous tasks such as cleaning utensils, polishing knives and boots, etc. Mussaulchis have



found a passing mention in several texts and memoirs, clearly reflecting how they were constantly present in backgrounds of important gatherings, meetings, and discussions. They hence bore witness to each and every historical event that took place after sundown.

The memoir of Thomas Bacon, a lieutenant from the artillery unit of the Bengal army who travelled throughout the Indian subcontinent from 1831 to 1836, mentions the following<sup>7</sup> :

“The tent was most glaringly lighted ; mussaulchis, or torch-bearers, stood here and there, ready to attend any person who might require them...”<sup>8</sup>

Robert G. Wallace’s journal, while describing a procession returning from the caves of Ellora, described lamp handlers a constantly accompanying their masters to various destinations:

<sup>5</sup> Chatterjee, Animesh. *The Servant and the Electrical Engineer*, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Aitken, Edward Hamilton. *Behind The Bungalow*, 1889.

<sup>7</sup> The Lieutenant mentions the mussaulchis while recounting on his visit to Delhi, where he was hosted by the deposed brother of the ruler of Gwalior, namely, Maharaja Hindu Rao.

<sup>8</sup> Bacon, Thomas. *First Impressions And Studies From Nature In Hindostan; Embracing An Outline Of The Voyage To Calcutta And Five Years And The Doab, From MCCCXXXI To MDCCCXXXVI*, Volume 2, Wm. H. Allen And Co. Leadenhall Street, London, 1837.

“...Besides their head servants, they had a camel and a hoot walla to carry their canteens, with breakfast and dinner apparatus, together with their mussauls, couch wallahs, and gora wallahs...”<sup>9</sup>

James Forbes’ memoir deals in depth with the mussau. He articulates that in certain areas, the task of the torch bearer was handed on to the village barber, but this varied from region to region. His work mentions the importance of mussaul which were required to assemble in great numbers, especially in case of a procession or a wedding, stating that their work gave “a brilliant effect to the spectacle”.

Forbes also gives in depth description of the torches handled by the mussaulchis :

“The massaul, or torch, in India, is composed of coarse rags, rolled up to the size of an English flambeau, eighteen or twenty inches long, fixed in a brass handle : this is carried in the left hand ; in the right the massaulchee holds a brass vessel containing the oil, with which he feeds the flame as occasion requires. By these means a bright extensive light is kept up.”<sup>10</sup>

Though they remained to be an important aspect in the lives of privileged classes, domestic servants were more often than not, despised by their employers, and this was more true to the staffs which were considered to be of a ‘lower’ order, like the mussaul. A certain Lieutenant

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, Robert Grenville. *Fifteen Years In India; Or, Sketches Of A Soldier’s Life Being An Attempt To Describe Persons And Things In Various Parts Of Hindostan From The Journal Of An Officer In His Majesty’s Service*, London, 1882.

<sup>10</sup> Forbes, James. *Oriental Memoirs: A Narrative Of Seventeen Years Residence In India*, Volume 2, second ed., London, 1834.

General of the Madras Staff Corps named E.F. Burton wrote the following about the general nature of Indian servants:

“...servants are, very commonly, almost useless, cowering all day over a fire in their "godowns," and living in a state of semi-torpor, highly inconvenient to their employers”.<sup>11</sup>

That servants stole at every possible opportunity was an often repeated account in Anglo- Indian literature<sup>12</sup>. In *Behind the Bungalow*, an 1889 satirical publication describing life with Indian servants in an Anglo-Indian household, the author wrote of the mussaul:

“The Mussaul’s name is Mikkun, which means butter, and of this commodity I believe he

absorbs as much as he can honestly or dishonestly come by. How else does the surface of him

acquire that glossy, oleaginous appearance, as if he would take fire easily and burn well? I wish we could do without him!”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, when the electrification of colonial India started, the traditional apparatus and servants that perhaps evoked the most complaints from electrical engineers were servants like mussaulchis and pankha wallahs. Their elimination



was seen as essential for the better adoption of a new, more efficient lifestyle wherein comfort was not subject to human faults and discrepancies, but was rather mechanically and continuously supplied.

This led to gradual diminishing of the mussaul's occupation. In the few extravagant households, many of them resorted to just washing dishes and polishing knives, but most of the employers

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<sup>11</sup> Burton, Edmund Francis. *An Indian Olio*, Edinburgh, 1888.

<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee, Animesh. *The Servant and the Electrical Engineer*, n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Aitken, Edward Hamilton. *Behind The Bungalow*, 1889.

halted their appointment in general. As the use of electrical technologies spread, employing

mussaulchis became more and more pointless and thus, people who used to be bearers of light for centuries, were pushed into darkness.