

Care-work for colonial and contemporary white families in India: A historical-anthropology of the racialized romanticization of the ayah.

Abstract

This article examines interracial gendered care-work through the figure of the ayah (maid) serving white families in India from the late-eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Historical and anthropological scholarships on domestic labor in India remain self-contained fields, and mostly focus on middle-class Indian households. Our comparative study offers insights into the racialized romanticization of the ayah through a trans-temporal approach combining archival work (for British imperial households in the past) with ethnographic research (for Euro-American expatriate households in the present). While exploring the parallels in colonial and contemporary domestic dynamics, and the intertwining of interracial anxieties and sentimentalization, we pay close attention to the subjectivities of Indian ayahs and their changing labor roles.

Keywords: Ayah, gender, race, labor, colonialism, neoliberalism, India

Introduction

“Ayah, in the mouth of a lisping baby, is one of the prettiest words of the East, and is learnt as soon as papa and mamma.”(*Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 1852: 249)

“Ayah umm warmth–protection a Hindi word for nanny that sounded warmer to mekind of mama.” (An expatriate French mother, 2014)

The romanticized figure of the ayah dominated British experiences and memories of colonial life in India. In the postcolonial period, the figure of the ayah and her relationship with the white child still remains idealized in white expatriate experiences of domestic life in Indian cities. As the above quotes show, the ayah is enshrined as an intimate familial figure, almost like a mother. Despite sentimentalizing the ayah, both colonial and contemporary white employers displayed and continue to display racialized anxieties about the presence of “unhygienic”, working-class, native female bodies within the domestic space of their home. This article offers a comparative study of racialized-feminized care in colonial and contemporary India through the figure of the ayah, delineating how the double bind of interracial intimacy and interracial exploitation shapes the care-work of ayahs across time.¹

The historical and anthropological scholarships around South Asian domestic labor are largely self-contained fields of enquiry. Historians tend to treat Indian independence from British rule as a watershed moment and largely limit themselves – following periodization norms – to the precolonial and colonial periods (Chaudhuri, 1994; Blunt, 1999; Banerjee, 2004; Sen, 2009; Sinha and Varma, 2019; Robinson, 2018; Chakraborty, 2020; Dussart, 2022). South Asian anthropologists mostly pick up chronologically where historians leave, and tend to focus on the postcolonial and contemporary periods (Ray and Qayum, 2009; Sen and Sengupta, 2016; Sharma’ 2016; Grover, Chambers and Jeffery, 2018; Mahanta and Gupta, 2019; Grover, 2022).²

Consequently, the continuities and parallels in domestic service across the colonial and the postcolonial periods are hardly reflected on.³ This article combines archival and ethnographic methods to provide a trans-temporal “historical anthropology” (Cohn, 1980) of interracial gendered domestic labor in India, through the figure of the ayah. The colonial period is explored through British imperial cultural and medical archives – fictions, memoirs, letters, petitions, health manuals, and domestic guides written between the 1770s and 1930s. For the contemporary period, we rely on participant observation, interviews, online parenting forums, and expatriate guidebooks from 2014 to the present. Within our ethnographic setting in Indian cities, the names of all contemporary respondents - both employers and ayahs - have been anonymized.

Paid domestic labor is ubiquitous in Indian middle-class households. Scholars have deployed the lens of class to analyze how domestic service has shaped Indian middle-class identity, both in the colonial as well as in the contemporary period (Banerjee, 2004; Ray and Qayum, 2009). There is also a growing literature on trans-national care-work by working-class South Asians for elite Indian employers (Basnet and Sandhya, 2020; Grover, 2017). While the vast majority of domestic workers in India are employed by middle and upper-class Indian families, the small community of colonial and contemporary white families in India, employed and continue to employ specialized female caregivers familiar with western domestic practices, labeled “ayahs.” This article counters the popular notion that the colonial racialized care-network of ayahs became obsolete after the British left India in 1947. By focusing on the small resident community of white families employing Indian ayahs for domestic work and child-rearing, this article brings an intersectional lens to the scholarship on domestic labor in India. Race as an analytical category rarely figures in analyses of domestic labor in contemporary South Asia. Yet, as our article demonstrates, colonial racialized labor relations, in tandem with Western

nationality and white privilege in the globalized neoliberal care-economy, shapes white families' access to the care-labor of native women in contemporary India.

To what extent do nineteenth-century British colonial constructions of the Indian ayah persist in white expatriate accounts of domestic life in twenty-first-century India? How have the roles and experiences of ayahs changed from the colonial to the contemporary period? This article will first situate the care-work of ayahs in the colonial and neoliberal economy. The racialized anxieties around the figure of the ayah in didactic domestic management literature will then be contrasted with the affective cultural memories towards the ayah in white families' imagination. Finally, ayahs' narratives will be presented to showcase how racialized care-workers' perspectives challenge and complicate employers' viewpoints. The perspectives of servants are rarely explored in the historiography on colonial domestic-labor, given the inevitable difficulties in excavating servants' voices from colonial archives. Our archival and ethnographic research framework underscores the relational perspectives of both employers and ayahs. The perspectives of ayahs suggest their ambivalence towards the imperial and expatriate household; they straddle the world of eulogized narratives and affective ties but are equally the disposable "other", who are often demonized as carrier of diseases. Our article analyses the continuities and parallels in colonial and contemporary domestic dynamics between white families and their ayahs, and the paradoxical racialized anxieties around the romanticized figure of the Indian ayah.

Racialized feminized care-labor under colonial capitalism and neoliberal capitalism

The English East India Company's territorial expansion in the late-eighteenth century and India's transformation into a colonial economy ushered in a period of unemployment for artisans engaged in manufacturing and textile industries, thereby making available a large pool of male labor that entered the domestic service sector. British colonial households in India emulated Mughal elites and employed large retinues of men-servants. In the late 1770s, Philip Francis, a member of the newly constituted Supreme Council of Calcutta, for instance, boasted having "one hundred and ten servants to wait upon a family of four, and yet we are economists!" (Merivale, 1867: 25-26). The domestic retinue started reducing in the nineteenth-century, but Mughal servant-culture still left a legacy on British imperial servant categories, such as the "Banian, or Chief servant", "Sarkar, or Steward", "Khansaman, or Butler", "Khidmatgar, or Table-servant", "Bawarchi, or Cook", "Dhobi, or Washer-man", "Malee, or Gardener", "Darwan, or Gate-keeper" (Parkes, 1850: 209–210). In Britain, industrial employment opportunities for men, coupled with a Servant Tax imposed on employers for menservants in 1777, led to the steady feminization of domestic service in the nineteenth-century (Schwartz, 2019; Lethbridge, 2013). In the British Empire in India, however, cooking, cleaning, and other feminized domestic chores continued to be performed by Indian men-servants (Dussart, 2022). Colonial menservants in the British Empire were emasculated and juvenilized to highlight the masculinity of white masters (Lowrie, 2016)

While colonial domestic-labor was racialized and masculinized, intimate care-labor was predominantly feminized. Indian menservants such as bearers played with British children and took them out for walks. However, intimately tending to the bodies of British women and children, bathing, clothing, feeding, and caring for them, was performed by the ayah. The ayah was usually the only female servant among the domestic staff. If the British family had infant

children, an amah was hired temporarily to provide wet-nursing labor. The amah sometimes stayed on as the ayah. The ayah was usually an elderly woman, either Hindu or Muslim, but most often a Christian convert. The ayah's role in colonial households was that of a "lady's maid and nursemaid" (Parkes, 1850: 209). Sometimes the same ayah doubled as a child nurse and lady's maid; in more affluent households, separate ayahs would be employed for the British lady and for each of the children. The ayah as lady's maid was responsible for bringing in the morning breakfast to her mistress, making her bed, brushing and washing her hair, helping her into her clothes and boots, cleaning and stitching her lace and stockings. The ayah as nursemaid hand-fed, massaged, bathed and clothed the child, and nursed the child by the bedside all night when sick (Steel and Gardiner, 1888). The ayah's work also included entertaining British children with stories and singing lullabies (Hearle, 1912). The ayah was sometimes the wife of one of the menservants, and lived in the servant's quarter in the compound of the British imperial bungalow.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the East India Company's rule to the British Crown's takeover to the end of the British Empire, Indian ayahs continued to provide intimate physical and emotional care to British women and children. It is commonly assumed that the colonial ayah-system became obsolete after 1947 with the end of British rule, the departure of British families from India, and the formation of independent postcolonial nation states. In reality, ayahs continued to be employed – albeit in fewer numbers – in post-independent India, in the homes of foreign diplomats, Christian missionaries, and Western nationals working for international agencies. Many Christian ayahs and their families migrated from South India to Delhi in the mid-1940s to 1960s. Prior service with British families - for instance in the Kolar Gold Fields mining town near colonial Bangalore, fluency in English, work

experience as ayahs, and culinary skills in western dishes such as roast lamb, Shepherd's Pie, fruit cake etc. made them easily employable in international homes in the national capital.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a steady feminization of domestic labor in India. Excluded from older forms of agrarian and mill employment, working-class women started entering domestic service in large numbers from the 1930s, which enabled them to emulate middle-class notions of domesticity and respectability (Banerjee, 2004). The feminization of domestic service continued and census records reveal that women started dominating the domestic service sector from the 1970s. In the 1950s to 80s, the decades following independence, India followed a relatively closed economic system, characterized by socialism, Soviet-inspired central-planning, state intervention, business regulation, and a large public sector, within a Western-style liberal democracy (Menon, 2022). The post-independent economic model did not leave much room for white Euro-American presence in India, except as missionaries and diplomats, primarily in Delhi. These transient foreign white households in India hired English-speaking and educated Indian women as ayahs, preferably Christian women, who already had experience serving Western families.

In the 1990s, India opened up its protectionist economy to free trade, transnational capital, and foreign direct investment. Neoliberalization, deregulation, and privatization marked a new trajectory in India's domestic service sector, which expanded rapidly and became more feminized (Gooptu, 2013). Economic liberalization facilitated international migration and an influx of foreign nationals from the Global North on short- or long-term work-contracts for multinational companies, international agencies, educational institutions, media and hospitality industries. This led to the establishment of a transient community of foreign white families in India's major cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore as well as Pondicherry and Goa.

Unlike Indians abroad who are designated as “immigrants”, foreign nationals from the Global North identify as “expatriates” (Grover, 2018). “Expatriate” signals a transnational cosmopolitan cultural identity in a globalized world, although the term is coded in white privilege and race–class–citizenship hierarchies. Unlike the colonial period when the resident foreign community in India was predominantly British, the contemporary expatriate community in India is much more diverse, comprising Americans, Canadians, Australians, white South Africans, and various European nationals such as French, German, and Swiss. Coming from middle-class backgrounds, these expatriates are usually unaccustomed to hiring domestic workers in their home countries. But once in India, they immediately emulate Indian middle-class practices of employing paid domestic laborers. With limited institutionalized public day care or private nurseries in Indian cities, double-income expatriate couples become overwhelmingly reliant on Indian paid care-work. Racialized outsourcing of mothering and childcare is by no means unique to contemporary India. It is an essential aspect of global capitalism, upper-middle class white women’s increased participation in the neoliberal global economy, the easy availability of low-paid immigrant women in the Global North, and low-paid local women in the Global South (Macdonald, 2011; Hochschild, 2012).

Expatriate employers in India continue to use the colonial term “ayah”. The role of the ayah in expatriate households, however, has been modified and broadened from the colonial lady’s maid and nursemaid to an all-rounder. The all-rounder ayah is expected to have an eclectic skill-set; emotional, manual, managerial and cognitive labors are all prerequisites. Some employers still prefer hiring one or two ayahs exclusively for raising children, echoing their core colonial task. But most expatriate employers prefer to hire all-rounder ayahs for chores such as cooking, cleaning, ironing, dusting, and also nurturing children. Online expat forums reveal a

demand for educated and trained all-rounder ayahs with highly specialized skills, such as organizing “fun play-dates and excursions in parks” for expatriate children, baking and cooking “European, Chinese, and Thai cuisines”, along with “tutoring” expertise and transnational travel experience. Other employers expect their ayahs to have multilingual fluency, in local languages such as Hindi, and in foreign languages such as French, apart from English.

Many expatriates convey ignorance about the colonial genealogy of the ayah. They argue that the employment of domestic workers is an Indian custom. Sophie, a pregnant white South African woman, for instance, opined: “We expatriates do not hire *ayahs*. This is an Indian thing. We like to raise children ourselves.” Sophie’s comment insinuates a moral dichotomy of the Western biological mother’s pure love versus the Indian ayah as an embodiment of commodified care. Sophie, who was raised in South Africa, completely overlooks the ubiquity of black women employed in white South African homes. Likewise, a number of expatriates gloss over racialized domestic care-labor in the Global North (e.g. migrant nannies, cleaners, and care-workers). Ironically, the mother–child ideal, marking the supposedly superior civilized values of a stronger emotional bond, is expeditiously overturned after expatriate women give birth. Post-pregnancy, Sophie recruited two ayahs, claiming that her husband travelled incessantly, and she could not cope with the physical exhaustion of care-giving. Hiring ayahs meant that she could go on holidays and pursue a vibrant social life in Delhi. With Sophie relocating to Singapore, she was arranging a domestic worker visa for one of her ayahs. Despite initial moral and critical rejoinders, expatriate women in contemporary India, just like their colonial counterparts, universally hire ayahs.

Imperial and expatriate domestic management: deploying hygiene rationales for race, class, and gender anxieties

White families newly arriving in India – both in the colonial and contemporary periods – have depended on informal support networks as well as professional experts on home management in India. British imperial women sought out advice offered in health manuals authored by colonial medical professionals, and domestic manuals written by Britons with personal experience in India. Expatriates similarly have access to domestic manuals specifically written for foreign nationals advising them how to hire and regulate Indian domestic workers. In addition, expatriates request information and guidance about employer–ayah relationships through placement agencies, online parenting forums, and their individual embassies. The prescriptive literature on domestic management for imperial and expatriate employers in India routinely provides cautionary warnings against intimate physical and emotional proximity with Indian ayahs, even as they advise white employers on ways to extract intimate domestic care-labor from their Indian ayahs. Anxieties about race, class, and gender are often veiled in a medical language of health and hygiene.

British colonial medical fears of the threatening tropics – dirt, germs, diseases, and immoral vices – converged in the figure of the Indian ayah. Ayahs (and amahs) were usually the only Indians who figured in colonial manuals that instructed British women how to scientifically manage the home and ensure the health of British children in India. *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India* voiced colonial medical anxieties by advising British mothers recruiting an Indian maid to inspect if she had “any marks of leprosy about her” (Anonymous, 1836: 59). Additionally, the anonymous medic instructed British mothers to “personally see that” the Indian

nursemaid cleaned herself with soap and warm water because “natives of this class are generally so dirty . . . your baby might have some cutaneous disease communicated to it” (Anonymous, 1836: 60). British race and class anxieties about the bodies of Indian ayahs were thus given a medical justification through the discourse of health and hygiene.

Kingscote (1893), in the manual *The English Baby in India and How to Rear it*, voiced the gendered racialized anxiety that “the women of India are even more lazy and deceitful, as a rule, than the men”, and “they marry and intermarry till they do not themselves know what relation they are to each other”. Because “the whole health and perhaps the life of your child may depend on how the *ayah* treats it”, British mothers were advised to be particularly careful while selecting the ayah (p.107–110). Kingscote urged British mothers to ensure that the ayah is “a clean woman”, who bathes regularly, and wears clean cotton clothes; the ayah should not take these clean clothes to her own house or to the native bazaar; she should not appear in the nursery in her home clothes but “should change on her return before touching the children”. She prescribed many other elaborate regimens to “avoid infection”. Her cautionary anecdotes linked germs with native bodies:

I have known *ayahs* that take children to the most unhealthy and disease-infected parts of the bazaar because they have relatives there, letting the children play meanwhile with filthy little native children (Kingscote, 1893: 107–123).

A recurring anxiety in colonial domestic and health manuals was the supposedly frequent practice of Indian ayahs putting British children to sleep with opium. It was a common practice for working-class Indian mothers to administer opium to their infants till the age of two or three “to keep the children quiet so as to allow the mother to carry out her work unhampered whether in the factory or in the field”, although unfortunately it led to high infant mortality (Chopra,

1939: 504). Ayahs who may have allayed their own biological children with opium, imported this practice into the imperial home. British manual-writers, such as Kingscote, took this practice as evidence of the “cunning and deceit(ful)” nature of ayahs, and warned British mothers by citing a “drugging case” she claimed to have personally observed in India:

A young girl... had an *ayah* to whom she was so much attached that she kept her on after her marriage and as nurse to her first child. This child died while a baby from an incomprehensible illness that baffled medical science. Two years later another child was born, a very healthy but very restless child... the child refused all food and lay flushed but sleeping in its cradle all day and night.... At last, a doctor was called in, and without hesitation said, ‘The child has been drugged’. This trusted ayah had successfully poisoned each child with drugs, and the death of the first had been no warning.... (Kingscote, 1893: 119-120).

Racializing the dark bodies of ayahs, Kingscote further cautioned British mothers that the “brown skin” of Indian ayahs camouflaged the opium or hemp.

Colonial prescriptive texts not only depicted Indian ayahs as treacherous mercenaries, but also emphasized the inherent ignorance of Indian nursemaids. Even if good-hearted, ayahs supposedly did not possess the intellect to decipher what was good for the health of children:

They have no idea of cold or warmth with regard to food, clothing, or bath water. They will give a child a cold bath one day, and scald him in a boiling one the next. They will put on a vest and a flannel petticoat one day and not the next. They will give him a bottle hot enough to burn his throat at one instant, and quite cold the next (Kingscote, 1893: 117–118).

Colonial domestic manuals advised British women to clearly lay out the terms of work while employing Indian ayahs. The *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book*, for instance, urged British women:

In engaging with an Ayah who speaks English, it is necessary to be very particular in your agreements as to the amount of your wages, and also whether they expect food, as their demand at first will be made generally without reference to the latter, and at as high a rate as they can venture to ask . . . (Riddell, 1860: 5)

Despite taking advantage of the low wages of Indian maids in comparison to the much higher wages of Western maids, both colonial and contemporary white employers express self-victimization, and are concerned that their Indian ayahs might be the ones taking financial advantage of them.

Both imperial and expatriate employers in India have used recommendation letters as a way of investigating the background and experiences of their Indian ayahs. Colonial domestic manuals warned British employers against gullibly relying on references while hiring Indian servants:

In most cases these characters are borrowed; in many they are written for the occasion, by a class of persons who earn their bread by writing characters for any applicant who will give them a few annas . . . (Riddell, 1860: 1)

Despite such suspicions, British employers routinely used “chits” or recommendation letters from previous employers while hiring ayahs. In post-independent India, the work histories, mannerisms, and personal hygiene minutiae of domestic workers have an official history in “character certificates” and institutional files (Grover, 2018). The British High Commission and the United States Embassy, established in the early 1950s, maintained Domestic Staff Registries,

manuals, and “blacklists”, continuing colonial attempts to racially regulate and discipline Indian servants. No such parallel “blacklists”, manuals, or servant registries are available from middle and upper class Indian employers from those decades or thereafter. This is not to suggest that Indian employers were more benevolent, but these documents reveal that the tiny Euro-American community in India practiced racialized policing of “native” servants, and their relationships with Indian servants were shaped by racialized anxieties.

Expatriate employers in contemporary India continue to rely extensively on references and personal information about domestic workers available from embassies, placement agencies, and online parenting forums and websites. Written references for domestic workers, however, are unheard of in contemporary upper/middle-class Indian homes; nor were written references a practice in colonial Indian households. The reliance on reference letters from fellow white employers shows the deep racialized mistrust of native laboring women in the minds of imperial and expatriate employers. The anxieties of race and class, however, are legitimized as a way of acclimatizing in a foreign culture.

Apart from recommendations, colonial domestic guidebooks also advised British employers to register their Indian domestic servants with the local police, as “it will afford an opportunity for detection, should they be old offenders, as the Police have better means of making enquiries than you can possibly have” (Riddell 1860: 2) Guidebooks and placement agencies for expatriate families more than a century and a half later offer the same advice: “We agree that domestic workers need to be registered with Police” (*Expatriate Company Manual*, 2009: 17). Placement agencies today not only offer police verification services, but also assure clients that they “keep scanned copies” of domestic workers’ original identity documents such as passports, voter ID cards, and “also keep their fingerprint in our files” (*Expatriate Company*

Manual, 2009: 17). Detailed biometric documentation criminalizes Indian domestic workers and promises protection to expatriate employers, while not providing any reciprocal protection to domestic workers themselves.

Foreign white families in contemporary India can refer to a domestic service manual – anonymized here as the *Expatriate Company Manual* – which serves as a guide for hiring domestic staff (2009: 3). The authors of this manual, a team of Euro-Americans, operated a placement agency from 2008 to 2011. Unlike colonial manual-writers, they are not medical experts; rather they espouse a missionary role in formalizing domestic service in India, providing clear-cut and professional employer–employee guidelines. They have adapted sections of their manual from earlier guidelines assimilated by the British High Commission and the Embassy of the United States in New Delhi. The *Expatriate Company Manual* urges employers to ask the following questions:

For the Ayah:

- Have they had their own children?
- If not, have they cared for an infant/children before?
- Can they read books to your children?
- What do they know about first aid?
- Do they know what CPR is? (2009: 8)

The list of questions highlights the shifting role of the contemporary ayah compared to her colonial counterpart. Ayahs working for expatriate families are expected to have basic medical knowledge, apart from care-giving experience. Nonetheless, akin to colonial guides that warned imperial mothers against trusting ayahs, the *Expatriate Company Manual* directs the expatriate mother to “give your ayah as much guidance as possible . . . set the limits and keep a watchful

eye..... it is common for ayahs to be overly lenient” (2009: 20). This instruction not only implies a race-class-gendered potential (or lack of potential) for nurturing and childcare, but also advocates disciplining and regulation of care-givers based on both race and class perceptions.

The *Expatriate Company Manual* advises foreign employers on hiring as well as firing Indian ayahs. Employers are advised to provide their domestic staff a reason for termination, such as “habitual tardiness, poor personal hygiene, damage to quarters, having extended family move into quarters without permission, padding the bills”, etc. (2009: 17) Colonial guidebooks’ fear of Indian servants as mercenary extortionists find space in the *Expatriate Company Manual’s* advice to employers: “Please don’t allow yourself to be a victim of bill padding” (2009: 22). Despite insisting on the impeccable health and hygiene of ayahs, the manual urges expatriate employers to let their Indian domestic staff know that “they are ultimately responsible for their own health . . . medical expenses” (2009: 7). The manual also cautions expatriate employers that disgruntled dismissed staff can make the hiring of new maids difficult: “They all gossip and have an amazing network. Be careful”. The *Expatriate Company Manual* asks its clients to report “bad experiences so that we can either make a note on the candidate’s file or add their details to our blacklist” (2009: 17). There exists no reciprocal blacklist, however, to safeguard Indian ayahs from abusive expatriate employers.

Terminating the employer–employee relationship on account of a domestic worker’s poor hygiene receives endorsement in the *Expatriate Company Manual*. Besides hygiene, the manual recommends that all potential domestic workers should undergo medical examinations such as a urine and blood test and chest x-ray. While in the colonial era, the fear of leprosy and cholera was pervasive in manuals, today the focus is on tuberculosis (TB) and HIV. Furthermore, under the title “Some Common Mistakes – Sound Advice” the *Expatriate Company Manual* advises

that employers should maintain a social distance from domestic staff “by not getting overly friendly” (2009: 23). In addition, the *Expatriate Company Manual* recommends the surveillance of domestic staff through periodical spot inspections of servants’ residential quarters. Some expatriate employers adopt domestic surveillance by installing nanny cams or CCTV in kitchens, children’s rooms, and the living area that connect with their mobile phones. They argue that as domestic service is unregulated in India, as foreign nationals they are merely pursuing their own safety by keeping an eye on the ayah. Race-class-gender anxieties about Indian ayahs continue from the colonial to the contemporary, but modern expatriate employers have access to more sophisticated technologies of domestic control and surveillance.

Expatriate race–class anxieties appear in online parenting forums as well. In one such forum, a vitriolic debate commenced as a French lady focused obsessively on issues of hygiene and the perceived indolence of Indian ayahs:

I am looking for someone dependable, who does not lie around the house half of the day, doesn’t bring their bare-bottomed child to work when repeatedly told not to, and who wants to work - these days this has to be mentioned.

This narrative of the “bare-bottomed child” and the alleged laziness and insincerity of ayahs represents the racialized language of colonial manuals from a bygone era. The servant’s dirty body as the source of contamination also echoes the fears expressed in colonial domestic manuals. The French lady’s advert, however, generated controversy. A cohort of expatriate online members pointed to the advert’s racist content, calling it “offensive”. They defended their ayahs’ work ethics and underlined how they valued paid domestic labor. Challenging biased representations of ayahs and diseased native bodies, an American lady elucidated how diapers are for the rich and hence many babies have bare bottoms. The French employer, after

apologizing profusely, argued in her defense that after a series of misadventures with Indian domestic staff she was merely articulating clear-cut needs. Her justification of the “bare-bottomed child” narrative was linked to an incident with a previous ayah, whose son had diarrhea and apparently “spread the germs” in her house.

The association of Indian servants’ dark bodies with germs and disease intensifies in white employers’ anxieties during public health crises. During colonial epidemics of smallpox, plague, and cholera, the bodies of Indian ayahs were seen as the source of contagion, bringing infection into the white home (Report of the Sanitary Commissioner, 1871: 49). Colonial medical manuals recommended heightened physical distance between imperial children and their Indian ayahs and insisted on inoculating Indian domestic workers. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, there is a parallel class–race–hygiene anxiety among expatriate employers about domestic workers living in overcrowded slums and bringing the disease to their homes. Follow-up interviews with live-out domestic workers for white families affirmed that many have been strictly told to keep away from expatriate employers’ households, resulting in loss of income in some cases. However, when the employers are sick or exhibit Covid-19 symptoms, their maids are often asked to show up to work, to care for them, and to clean up after them.

Romanticization of the Indian ayah in colonial and postcolonial white imagination

Despite the racialized anxieties in prescriptive literature on home management, in both imperial and expatriate memories of domestic life in India, the figure of the ayah is idealized. British memoirs, letters, and fiction set in colonial India glorify the faithfulness of the Indian ayah and particularly sentimentalize the bond between her and the white child. Contemporary

white families in India similarly emotionalize the relationship with their Indian ayahs, especially their protective and loyal deportment. In contrast to the domestic manuals' warnings against proximity with the unhygienic, diseased, dark bodies of Indian servants, white families express intimacy and love for their ayahs. Constructing a familial relationship with Indian ayahs is often a symbolic representation of imperial and expatriate experience in India. Romanticizing the Indian ayah enabled colonial white families to construct a liberal imperial identity, just as it helps contemporary white families to construct a cosmopolitan expatriate identity.

The ayah–white child dyad came to be greatly romanticized in British imperial imagination. Many British families commissioned expensive family portraits with their Indian ayahs as a keepsake of their life in India (Chakraborty, 2019). British writings praised Indian ayahs as the “sable guardian spirits” of their “little babas” (Chambers’s *Edinburgh Journal*, 1852: 249). Although medical manuals warned against the close intermingling of white children with native ayahs, British employers’ writings highlighted the ayah’s selfless devotion to the white child and the emotional and physical closeness between the two. The ayah’s fidelity was particularly glorified in British writings in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Mutiny or the Great Rebellion against British rule. Diaries and journals describing violent attacks by Indian sepoys in 1857 noted several cases where British children “were happily saved by the ayah” or “protected by an old ayah” (Anonymous, 1859: 103–108, 400). A British lady wrote in her diary that “many an ayah in the Mutiny proved her devotion at the cost of her life, and many would do so again” (King, 1884: 130).

Not only first-hand British accounts, even Mutiny novels – often written decades after the 1857 Indian rebellion – glorified the ayah’s faithfulness. The children’s storybook *Effie and Her Ayah*, set in 1857, recounts the tale of an Indian Christian ayah, Hannah. As the Rebellion broke

out, her British employers were killed by the sepoys, but the faithful ayah was able to save her employers' baby daughter Effie. Risking her own life, she hid with Effie in a deserted hut, fed her warm goat's milk while suffering from hunger and cold herself. They happily lived together for years pretending to be mother and daughter until some thieves, who discovered Effie's and the ayah's real identity, attacked them and murdered the ayah (Batty, 1873). While colonial health manuals harped on the dangers of the white child "going native" due to close contact with Indian nursemaids, this story showed that it was precisely the Indianization of the white child's body and the emotional closeness with the ayah that saved her life.

In another children's fiction, *Edith and her Ayah*, a little English girl persuades her ayah to pray to Jesus and give up her heathen beliefs. One day, the girl strays into a jungle and the ayah rushes to save her, but they fall in the path of a dangerous Bengal tiger. Edith's prayers to Jesus are answered and their lives are spared, but the little girl gets a severe fever from the trauma. Despite British health manuals advising parents never to let the ayah doctor the child, in this story it is the ayah who nurses the child back to health with her "tenderness and love" and her prayers to God (A.L.O.E. 1874: 7–19).

In an autobiographical account from the 1890s, a young English girl, Mary, who was raised in India, comes to England with her beloved ayah. Mary weeps bitterly all the time as her ayah is supposed to return to India in a few days and the author writes, "she clings to her black maid, like a loving child to a tender mother." When the day of the ayah's departure arrives, Mary throws herself on the floor and starts wailing, "Oh ayah, dear ayah, come back and take me to my happy home" (Bathgate, 1892: 139–140). The imperial home, far from being the dangerous site of physical and moral contamination, as colonial medical authorities warned, was for Mary a much happier space than England. While health manuals often projected the native nursemaid's

body as a source of dirt, disease, and contagion, in this memoir, it is the departure of the ayah that causes the English girl to fall sick with sorrow.

British children who grew up in India routinely emotionalized the relationship with their Indian ayahs. A British woman Monica Clough's unpublished memoir, "A Childhood in Travancore 1922–31", for instance, contrasts her disciplinarian "fat", "vulgar", "boring" Eurasian nurse with her Indian ayah Mary's unconditional love and care. With great sensitivity, the retrospective memoir critically notes the implicit racism and the difficulties faced by Indian ayahs with the strict regimen of hygiene and sanitation imposed on them by British employers:

Mary ayah found the great preoccupation with hygiene hard to follow. . . . Racial hostility was rationalized into a preoccupation with germs. . . . Close contacts with Indian children, bazaar food was forbidden (Clough, no date).

Yet, despite these medically sanctioned measures imposed by British parents to ensure the health of British children in empire, Clough remembers her constant transgressive physical and emotional proximity with Mary:

Ayah slept with me on a mat below my bed . . . she had a son too and we occasionally played

Mary ayah cried when I cried, afraid that she would be sent away and she would never get such a good job again Mary ayah spoke a mixture of English and Tamil I loved Mary, then and always (Clough, no date).

In retrospective imperial memories, the Indian ayah became the nostalgic hook to British imperial life and to childhoods spent in India. British men and women, interviewed decades after Indian independence, fondly recollect childhood memories of their Indian ayahs.

The colonial provenance of the term ayah is often forgotten or unknown to expatriate employers. Olivia, an American expatriate, when asked “Do you know that the term ayah originated in the colonial period?” remarks in surprise, “I had no idea!” Nevertheless, the unconditional love and care provided by Indian ayahs is idealized by contemporary expatriate families.

In recommendation letters, expatriate employers highlight and commodify the devotion of the ayah through words such as “trustworthy”, “great”, “fantastic”, “unforgettable”, “very loving”, and “worth it”. A family that was relocating to Europe, for instance, posted the following reference letter on the Delhi Expatriate Network:

Great Ayah to Recommend: We are leaving Delhi soon and our wonderful ayah is looking for another job. Tina is young, enthusiastic, caring and great fun to be with. She has looked after our 3 year old son for just over 12 months now and he absolutely adores her. She has a lovely, natural way with children. She always has their safety and well-being in mind, all the while laughing and giggling and joining in with all their games. Tina has been 100% committed and reliable and I can't recommend her highly enough. She will very much be missed by the whole family.

The *Expatriate Company Manual* explicitly warns foreign employers not to treat Indian domestic workers “as family” (2009: 21). Despite this professional advice, expatriate families routinely describe their relationships with Indian ayahs in familial terms. A British expatriate couple interviewed in Goa expressed how much their ayah Sangeeta was loved by their children and insisted that Sangeeta was almost a part of their family:

Throughout our stay in India, the children have called our ayah Sangeeta aunty. They miss her so much when we are away from India in the summer. Sangeeta is really like

part of our family. . . . I know people use this phrase lightly, but we do sincerely mean it. Sangeeta has told us that if we were to ever leave India, she will quit paid domestic labor. She only wants to work for our family and no one else.

Naomi, a British-Austrian, who has lived in Delhi for fifteen years, presents a similar narrative of familial dependence on Indian ayahs:

I have relied heavily on ayahs, and they have been a massive part of my life . . . just like family.

The race–class-dominated ayah–employer relationship referred to by Naomi required the building of trust and the unfolding of complex negotiations in a new country. Naomi candidly traces her employment journey with her ayah, Christina:

From Christina (our children’s ayah) I learnt mothering. She taught me so much about how to look after children. I was only twenty-eight years old when we arrived in Delhi. In Hong-Kong I myself grew up with a Filipina nanny. As a newly arrived expatriate in Delhi, when I met Christina she was in her late forties. I had to adjust to a domestic situation where I was getting orders from an older woman. Eventually, I told her I was the boss.

Naomi affirms that with her children having grown up (ages ten onwards), she no longer needs Christina to look after them. She would, however, feel awkward in terminating their relationship as Christina has been just like a family member.

Teresa, who is Naomi’s friend, discusses how ayahs have a very natural way with children (“a real talent with toddlers”). Trust, reliability, patience, and selfless commitment underscore such narratives. Naomi’s child accompanies her ayah, Mary, to church every Sunday. Other examples include trusting ayahs with administering medicines, supervising homework, and

contributing to everyday managerial decision-making. These ayahs have made their employers' India sojourns secure and comfortable. Just like the imperial home, the expatriate home is depicted as a happy and safe space for raising children. Just like colonial family portraits with ayahs, Teresa has pictures of her child and her ayah against the backdrop of Delhi's Mughal monuments. She insists that her ayah is more patient than she is. Naomi and Teresa are critical of the installation of CCTV that certain expatriate families endorse, arguing that such intrusive technologies are unnecessary and unjustified. Both concur that either employers should trust the ayah or not hire her at all.

Despite the received wisdom found in domestic manuals and online forums advising emotional distancing, expatriates' accounts of their relationships with Indian ayahs demonstrate not only sentimentalization, but occasionally also show acute sensitivity towards their ayahs' feelings. There are employers who are well aware of the global inequalities of interracial labor and will not toe the line with their peers on race–class prejudices. Certain employers voice respectful and reflexive discourses around paid domestic labor. More so, against negative media representations of life in developing countries, the expatriate home in India is constructed by white parents as a happy and perfectly safe space for children to grow up in. Just like the ayah remained the nostalgic hook for British imperial children's ties to India, for contemporary expatriate children, an authentic Indian childhood is credited to the Indian ayah.

The perspectives of ayahs

While colonial and contemporary white employers emotionalize the relationships with their Indian ayahs, how do ayahs themselves feel about their imperial and expatriate employers? Do they reciprocate the love that their employers profess? How do ayahs feel about the racist

regime of bodily regulation that domestic manuals prescribe in the name of hygiene and health? How have Indian ayahs – both in the colonial period and today – navigated the exploitative yet intimate relationships with their white employers?

In colonial archives, the perspectives of Indian ayahs rarely appear. It is difficult to assess the lived experiences of ayahs from their elusive voices, which were usually carefully curated and preserved by their British employers for their own nostalgic or missionary purposes. Some letters purportedly from Indian ayahs to their British employers have survived, and were even published in Victorian missionary magazines. One such letter, from a Tamil ayah named Amadhanam to her erstwhile British employers in the 1870s, runs as follows:

From your valuable letter I heard of the good health of yourself and my mistress, and the apple of my eye, the golden Bobbie, and the golden baby I did not feel it so much when I parted from you. But more and more do I desire to be with you and my dear mistress and my precious Bobbie when shall I see you again? I think of you by day and night and my heart is filled with ceaseless grief (Meadows, 1879: 133)

The sentimentalized relationship constructed by British families is reiterated and amply reciprocated by this ayah. Such letters preserved by employers, however, may not be an accurate testament of colonial domestic workers' perspectives. Such letters tell us more about what employers desired to remember – memories that would highlight their own paternalism and benevolence – rather than what their ayahs may have actually experienced.

Legal documents and petitions preserved in colonial official archives also offer us perspectives of ayahs. Unlike letters preserved by employers, these petitions record the gendered grievances experienced by Indian ayahs while working for colonial employers. A rare testimony by an ayah, Juhoorun, survives from 1838. Juhoorun was born in a coastal Bengali village and

migrated to Calcutta at a young age in search of work. She found an apprenticeship with an ayah who worked for a British family, and from this woman Juhoorun learnt ayah's work. Soon she signed an indentured labor contract and sailed to the British colony of Mauritius to work as an ayah:

I went to Mr. Boileau; I served him for two and a half years; he treated me very ill, gave me no pay, beat me, and said he would give me much money if I would let him have connexion with me; I told him he ought to be ashamed, that he had a wife in his bosom; that I was a Mussulmanee, and would lose my caste among my fellows, and refused, and he beat me I was sent three times to the house of correction; I got salt and rice to eat. . . I did complain to my mistress of my master wanting me to lie with me . . . and my master would come and beat me for having told my mistress (Parliamentary Papers 1841: 127–128).

Juhoorun's testimony reveals the harrowing experience of physical and sexual abuse that many Indian ayahs faced from colonial employers (cf. Varma, 2019). With little access to legal recourse, many colonial ayahs had to put up with emotional, financial, and sexual exploitation merely to survive. While colonial employers expressed racialized hygiene anxieties about ayahs, Juhoorun's testimony shows that ayahs sometimes experienced caste anxieties in close proximity with European bodies. Petitions and testimonies by other ayahs reveal their fears of caste pollution at the prospect of crossing the ocean (*kalapani*, literally "black water") and working as care-givers in other parts of the British Empire (The Humble Petition of Beebee Jaunee Ayah, 1831).

Colonial Indian ayahs sometimes made significant income by sailing with British families to Britain and providing their care-labors on ships during the months-long sea voyages

(Robinson, 2018; Chakraborty 2020). However, trans-oceanic care-work was a risky endeavor as Indian ayahs were sometimes abandoned by their employers in Britain, without wages and without return passage. Petitions, letters, and advertisements by Indian ayahs stranded in Britain reveal their desperation to return home to India. Destitute ayahs were sometimes given temporary shelter in the Ayahs Home, run by the London City Mission. Many ayahs offered to work without wages for a British family for the entire duration of the long ship voyage back to India in order to obtain a passage ticket. Ayahs stranded in Britain sometimes wrote to the India Office desperately requesting financial assistance, a request that was routinely denied:

I am writing to the Matron of the Ayahs' Home to know if she can help me to get a 'working passage' and in case she is able to do so, I trust you will kindly see your way to arrange that I stay in the Ayahs' Home until I can sail for the East (Miss Burby's application, 1913).

This distressed ayah's letter, and the British state's firm refusal to help her, provides a very different picture of the employer–ayah relationship than the loving bond constructed in British imperial fiction sentimentalizing the ayah.

In the colonial period, ayahs were seldom literate, although many spoke broken English to communicate with their British employers. By contrast, in contemporary India, working-class women employed as ayahs with expatriates usually speak fluent English, may possess a university degree, and have prior work experience in offices. Like colonial ayahs, many contemporary ayahs also lead mobile lives, traveling abroad and within India with their international employers. Echoing the affectionate letter of the colonial ayah from 1879, many twenty-first century ayahs endorse the strong emotional bonds with white expatriate children. Others, however, are more indifferent to and even critical of the ayah–child dyad. The latter

point out how work relationships with expatriates are temporary and stress that it is prudent not to be drawn into strong emotional attachments.

Samantha had been praising her ayah's competence and how her child adored Mary. On the other hand, Mary's response in a separate interview (not in the presence of her employer) was one of pragmatic accommodation and mundane adjustment:

I like looking after children, but frankly I have got used to this kind of work. Even though I have a BA degree in English, I was never happy working in offices. Caring for a child, as well as cooking and cleaning for the family, is also tiring work. When I go home, I end up repeating all this—housework and cooking for my own adolescent children.

Many contemporary Indian domestic care-workers express a desire to work for Euro-American employers over Indians. Rosie, an ayah, shed light on why nationality preferences are crucial and drew attention to the dynamics of what is commonly labeled as the expatriate bubble:

I have long-term experience with foreign nationals. Many of us prefer not to work with Indian families. Expatriates treat us better Indians will never offer you water . . . and if they do, it will be in an entirely different cup that will then be kept aside or thrown away. At the same time, it is still rare to see Indian people in expatriate circles.

Keeping boundary maintenance on the basis of race–class (i.e. the expatriate bubble) means that domestic staff also internalize racialized notions about their fellow Indians. Ayahs working for expatriates become active mediators in maintaining the expatriate bubble that thrives on both overt and subtle forms of racism. Resultantly, the ayah's voice often becomes racialized, which is perhaps another form of pragmatic adjustment. Rosie and other ayahs emphasize how servility, caste stigma, lack of dignity, and ill-treatment are prevalent in Indian households, which makes them gravitate towards expatriates.

Some ayahs, however, acknowledge racist micro-aggressions from expatriate employers. Tanya, a highly educated ayah, conveyed how she worked in an expatriate kitchen for three years without a fan. She never complained to her employers and they seemed to assume that the intense summer heat never affected her. While being respected for her tutoring capabilities and her culinary skills, Tanya's brown body was not perceived to feel the same discomfort as expatriates in the tropical summer. Indeed, some ayahs may not initially reveal discriminatory practices, such as being denied the use of a toilet or a glass of water from the expatriate household. These acknowledgements of unexpected humiliation, indignity, and discrimination emerge only over the course of many participant observation interactions and interviews. Ayahs' admissions of everyday racism counter expatriate employers' self-fashioning of liberal cosmopolitanism and subvert their claims of benevolence.

The voices of contemporary ayahs reveal the disjuncture between their everyday experiences in white expatriate homes and the employers' sentimentalized narratives. In conversation with Sangeeta, she does express appreciation for her employers and adoration for their children. She mentions, however, that she will quit domestic service in the near future because she has saved enough money to build a house. Comparing Sangeeta's account with that of her British employers ("if we were to leave India, Sangeeta will quit domestic labor – she only wants to work for our family and no one else"), the latter seem to be taking too much credit for their role in forging mutually strong emotional attachments. The actual motives for why working-class women like Sangeeta enter or leave domestic service appear to be of little interest to employers, while ayahs themselves may not want to disclose their future plans.

In another instance, a French expatriate, Simone, who was about to leave India for good, was highly distraught because her children simply loved their ayah: "We will miss our smiley,

reliable, and loyal ayah. No one can replace her.” Unfortunately, Simone could not take Meena to Paris because their flat was too small to accommodate her. Five months later, Meena had not found a job and in desperation had contacted Simone in Paris for a reference letter. To her dismay, Simone insisted that Meena email her latest curriculum vitae. Meena felt that a CV was unnecessary, as Simone knew first-hand her dedication to their family:

I practically raised the children myself. Ma’am and Sir were always socializing in Delhi.

When Pierre was born, on the very first night Ma’am put him in another room to sleep . .

. . she did not sleep with her own son! Later I offered and did the sleepless nights.

Meena believes that her dedication is under scrutiny and that the care she bestowed on Simone’s family seems to be a distant memory: “Once they leave India, they get involved in their own lives and it is not the same. They get busy and we matter less to them.” The irony of expatriate employers eulogizing ayahs yet forgetting them once they leave India has been articulated by many domestic workers.

What is quite agential in the expatriate household is that ayahs may be deploying discourses of emotional attachments, so as to secure their employment in a transient workforce. Ayahs reveal the harsh reality that “many expatriates are here today and gone tomorrow”. The children in their care become the ayahs’ focal point for bargaining their indispensability. It is not uncommon to hear ayahs expressing how the white child in their care is “like my daughter/son” or “the joy of this job lies in caring for children”. Ayahs often critique expatriate mothers for being lazy and over-dependent on hired help, while taking the credit for raising the children themselves. Employers who are in a phase of relocating may offer to take their ayahs with them or extend their India sojourns because of the ayah–child bond. The notion of “pragmatic intimacy” is useful to conceptualize highly unregulated employer–domestic worker relationships

in India (Sen and Sengupta, 2016: 154–174). Paid domestic labor exhibits overt contradictions; it is at once dominating and mutual, distant and intimate, exploitative and caring. Domestic workers in white homes in particular pragmatically position themselves in intimate familial relationships, so as to achieve a measure of dignity, security, and better remuneration in these transient jobs.

While the nature of historical archives – produced by the colonial state and colonial employers – make it difficult to unearth the voices of colonial ayahs, the ethnography on contemporary ayahs is quite rich. Despite some similarities in the nature of intimate care-work across time, the lived experiences of twenty-first-century ayahs are quite different from that of nineteenth-century ayahs, and the former cannot be superimposed on the latter. The rare first-person accounts of colonial ayahs, just like the oral narratives of contemporary ayahs, give us important perspectives on inter-racial gendered care-work “from below”. The perspectives of ayahs are particularly useful to juxtapose against employers’ accounts and advice manuals on domestic management.

Conclusion

The role of the ayah has considerably transformed from the colonial to the contemporary period. The work of colonial ayahs was limited to that of a “ladies maid” and “nursemaid”, given the preponderance of menservants in colonial India. With the feminization of domestic labor in twentieth-century India, contemporary ayahs serve as “all-rounders” replacing male cooks and butlers. Their roles portend a novel skillset whereby the emphasis is on managerial competence and professionalism that derives from certified training and gender-specific expertise. The latter trends reflect changing market forces that have also impacted domestic lives irrespective of

nationality in India (e.g. intensive parenting and cosmopolitan food habits). While nineteenth-century ayahs were rarely literate (although many spoke broken English), multi-lingual fluency is expected from twenty-first century ayahs in India. The nature of white households that employed ayahs has also significantly shifted, from that of British imperial administrators and missionaries in colonial India to a much wider range of mobile expatriate families from various countries in the Global North. Current expatriates work for multi-national companies, media organizations, embassies, education, and the hospitality sector. Many underscore diverse motivations for leading trans-national lives such as seeking out alternative lifestyles, becoming global entrepreneurs and re-inventing careers in India.

Yet, as our article demonstrates, there is a remarkable continuity in white families' access to the racialized care-labor of Indian working-class women across the colonial and contemporary period. While the colonial economy enabled British families to cheaply recruit Indian ayahs for their care-labor in India and during the long ship-voyages, the contemporary neoliberal Indian economy similarly enables the cheap employment of Indian women as care-givers in expatriate homes and transnationally. Globally, neoliberal capitalism has increased reliance on the paid care-labor of women of color, while making paid care-labor even more informal and precarious (Cox, 2006). In contemporary India, white expatriate families' employment of Indian ayahs is not only part of this global neoliberal trend, but also a continuity and revival of British colonial domestic practices. Paid domestic labor is a widely prevalent practice in middle-class Indian households. Yet, colonial and expatriate employment of Indian ayahs is a uniquely racialized romanticized practice, as this article shows. Colonial medical-manuals' anxiety about the white child's close proximity with the dark unhygienic body of the Indian ayah finds parallel in contemporary expatriate guides' recommendation to regulate the Indian ayah, and police the

inter-racial intimacies between the expatriate child and the Indian ayah. Similarly, British colonial idealization of the Indian ayah's self-less devotion is echoed by contemporary expatriate employers' glorification of the ayah's love and affection.

Across time zones, the perspectives of Juhoorun, Amadhanam, Mary, Tanya, Sangeeta, and Meena highlight the racialized asymmetry of employer–ayah relationships. The perspectives of ayahs counter the rhetoric of benevolence and mutually strong emotional attachments emphasized by imperial and expatriate employers. Both the colonial and the contemporary ayah's relationships with paid domestic labor, racialized care, and gendered nurturing are ambivalent and rooted in survival and pragmatism. The perspective of ayahs unravel forms of overt racism such as sexual exploitation by white men in the colonial period and more implicit racism in the closed expatriate home where locals are not always welcomed, and where ayahs themselves are not allowed to use employers' utensils and bathrooms through the rationale of hygiene. On the widespread usage of the colonial “ayah” epithet, contemporary ayahs remain perplexed as to why, despite certain strands of progressive discourses, generous praise, and other forms of support their employers offer, they continue in the twenty-first century to be labeled as ayahs.

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Notes

¹ In our article, we have used the colonial term “ayah” as this was and remains the term used by white families employing South Asian domestic workers.

² It must be noted that Sen is a historian and Sengupta is an economist, and their work was done in a Women’s Studies institutional location, allowing an interdisciplinary approach. The focus of their book is paid-domestic labor in contemporary Kolkata.

³ A recent exception to this trend is Sinha (2022).

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