



**SHREEMATI NATHIBAI DAMODAR THACKERSEY COLLEGE OF ARTS
& SHREEMATI CHAMPABEN BHOGILAL COLLEGE OF
COMMERCE & SCIENCE FOR WOMEN**

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NAAC B+ Grade (With CGPA 2.68)

Guest lecture report

Professor Swapna M. Banerjee, Professor in History at Brooklyn College & the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), USA delivered a visually stimulating presentation entitled 'Through Western Eyes: Visual Records of Ayahs in the Colonial Archive from the Late Eighteenth through Early Twentieth Centuries' on 14th December 2023. The lecture drew upon her research from her ongoing collaborative project with the Australian Research Council, titled "Ayahs and Amahs: Transcolonial Servants in Australia and Britain, 1780-1945 CE." which is featured on the website, <http://ayahandamahs.com/>.

The event was jointly organized by the Department of History of the S.N.D.T. College of Arts & S.C.B. College of Commerce & Science for Women and the post-graduate (P.G.) History Department of the S.N.D.T. Women's University at the Mumbai Churchgate campus. Dr. Jaswandi Wamburkar, HOD, P.G. Department of History and Principal (I/C) presided over the event. The event was coordinated and facilitated by Dr. Namrata R. Ganneri, Assistant Professor in History at the S.N.D.T. Arts College, Churchgate and attended by over 50 students and staff from the degree college and postgraduate departments of History and English at the university.

Describing herself as a social historian, Professor Swapna Banerjee described her research project as centred around the lives and quotidian experiences of ordinary people. In the talk, she explored the representations of *ayahs* who were employed in offering care-giving duties to children in European and Anglo-Indian homes during the colonial period. She argued that the word *ayah* meaning nursemaid came from the Portuguese term *aia*, which meant a tutor or governess in Portuguese. The earliest of *ayahs* were perhaps enslaved Portuguese or indigenous women transitioned into the role of domestic workers in British homes after manumission. However, most interesting details about their life and conditions of work were discovered via their travel-related documents as many of them accompanied young British children to England looking after them on ships during the long sea journey. However, once in England, they were abandoned and could not return home which led to the founding of an Ayah's Home in East Hackney, London in 1849 recently commemorated by a blue plaque, which ultimately recognizes these female overseas workers as an important part of British heritage.

Banerjee unearthed some of the earliest references to ayahs in the records of the National Archives of India in the early 18th century although her lecture alluded to the famous painting by the German painter Johann Zoffany of Warren Hastings and his wife with their ayah which indicated that ayahs were integral parts of European households. Banerjee discussed several Zoffany paintings. She also culled the Palmer papers in the Bodleian library for evidence about the life of ayah Joanna de Silva whose solo portrait fuelled considerable speculation about her exact position in the household she served. Banerjee looked at several portraits by professionals as well as amateurs like Gertrude Ellen Burrard and Emma Fullerton (Indian ayah with sleeping children) nestled in public libraries and galleries all over the UK and beyond to show how central this 'intimate labour' was to Anglo-Indian households. She also used duplicate passport copies in the British Library, London to demonstrate how women routinely accompanied little children during their passage to England and argued for the emergence of 'ayah' as a professional category by the mid-twentieth century. For instance, a Mrs Anthony whose profession was recorded as that of an ayah had travelled between England and India a record 54 times indicating that this seasoned ayah was an exemplary travelling professional. This provided an insight on how something considered routine in the subcontinent can become an exciting area of study for the intrepid historian.

Third Year BA student Sagarika Guha queried about the role of Christian missionaries in providing relief to the abandoned ayahs through the founding of ayah homes while another Third year BA student asked whether the ayahs were coerced into travelling abroad. Some of the other questions pertained to racist attitudes of employers and allegations of cruelty by the ayahs in various testimonies. Banerjee concluded the discussion by referring to the recent scholarship on the worlds of female domestic workers, viz, Gaiutra Bahadur's work *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013), Arunima Dutta's *Waiting on Empire A History of Indian Travelling Ayahs in Britian* (2023) and the more recent work of LSE-based Dr Shalini Grover on ayah training institutes during the colonial and contemporary periods.

The feedback collected from the attendees at the end of the lecture indicated that the event was well received generally.

Report submitted by

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