



BOOK REVIEW

THE ANGLO-INDIANS: A 500 YEAR HISTORY

Cheryl-Ann Shivan

S. Muthiah and Harry MacLure. *The Anglo-Indians: A 500-Year History*. Niyogi Books of India, 2014. 198 pages. Available at angloink.com (Rs 350) or amazon.com

The first efforts of the Anglo-Indian community, under the nomenclatures 'Eurasian' or 'Anglo-Indian', towards producing a body of written work about themselves were more political and historical rather than literary. When restrictions were placed on the group of people of mixed-race heritage in India, when a common identity with the British was suddenly stripped away from them, when they were removed from all positions of power, when economic strife ensued from this discharge from office and when discriminatory acts were put into force, it was then that this mixed group began to engage in discourses of self-identity. Initially, with a rise in the spirit of oneness, political writing, conveying opinion and shaping Anglo-Indian identity appeared in periodicals and journals published by and for the mixed-race community.

Almost a century later, appeared four books often referred to as the 'Anglo-Indian Heritage Series' – *Hostages to India* (1926) by Herbert Stark, *Cimmerii? Or Eurasians and their Future* (1929) by Cedric Dover, Reginald Maher's *These are the Anglo-Indians* (1962) and Frank Anthony's *Britain's Betrayal in India: The Story of the Anglo-Indian Community* (1969). The authors were Anglo-Indians who not only chronicled the rich and colourful history of the community but also attempted to fairly represent the same. (In her *Foreword* to the book under review, Dr. Beatrix D' Souza includes K. E. Wallace's *The Eurasian Problem* (1930) and Gloria Jean Moore's *The Anglo-Indian Vision* (1986) as important reference works too). These are among the most sought after books of the twentieth century for anyone interested in working on

Anglo-Indians as they provide a foundation for political, economic, cultural and literary studies on the people of the community, and they promote a better understanding of Anglo-Indian writing produced today which draws heavily on the resources of past community experiences.

While histories continued to be written adding to earlier works, it was from the 1980s onwards that Anglo-Indians became more productive in a literary sense, producing novels, novellas, autobiographies and memoirs on Anglo-Indians and Anglo-India while at the same time being spoken about unfavourably in voices not their own. It is, therefore, interesting to find an amalgamation of voices – Indian (to a greater degree) and Anglo-Indian in the work, *The Anglo-Indians. A 500-Year History* (2013), by S. Muthiah and Harry Maclure. While drawing heavily on earlier histories and by making astute observations on the past, Muthiah also brings to bear on the work, his interactions since childhood with people of mixed heritage, and Maclure's contribution is by virtue of being born in the community and serving it as a popular spokesperson in India and abroad. Muthiah also mentions Richard O'Connor, of Indian Customs, as providing additional input. The pictorial work would be better named a 'compendium' than a 'history' as it takes readers from a precisely represented past to a more recent history with parallel expositions on Anglo-Indian social life and occupational patterns as they have progressed into the twenty-first century.

The work is divided into two parts. Since the past informs the present, the first four chapters of Part 1 are devoted to a history of the mixed-races in India, but unlike other histories, the authors, going by the definition of Anglo-Indians, as laid down by the Indian Constitution, emphasise on descent from European ancestors, not just the British. Accepting this would, according to Muthiah, make tracing roots a much easier task for the community. However, it is perhaps, for the first time that someone has, also by the very same definition, attempted to explain who an Anglo-Indian is not! Children born of Anglo-Indians settled abroad cannot claim Anglo-Indian status as they are neither 'domiciled' in India nor are their parents 'habitually resident' in India anymore. Given this reasoning, it therefore, derives that the community will eventually continue to be valid only in India.

The next five chapters offer a social history of the Anglo-Indians. They include Anglo-Indian celebrations of which religion, festivity and food are integral parts and even offer a few Anglo-Indian recipes courtesy of Bridget White-Kumar. 'A Legacy of Schools' credits the Portuguese with sowing the seeds of modern teaching followed a century later by the British. These schools provided British orphans and mixed-race children with a skill-based education. Many exist even today, under different nomenclatures, following the Indian systems of education while retaining the discipline and other traditions of the Anglo-Indian schools of yore but with fewer numbers of children they originality intended to serve. The authors then go on to provide what they call a purely subjective list of about 30 odd schools that are over a century old.

Lifeline of a Community deals with a topic close to every Anglo-Indian heart – the Railways, and by extension, the railway colony and the railway institute, and later on, the railway hospital and the railway school. The chapter stresses that Anglo-Indians, both men and women, worked on the railways in various capacities and the higher the level of education they possessed, the better positions they could secure. Railway homes are described from personal memory which remembers certain central features in almost all homes and could only be secured by close associations with the families inhabiting them. The Institutes that varied in sizes concomitant with the junctions they were attached to are rightly described as the social and recreational centres for all Anglo-Indian families where both genders mixed freely. While many writers from outside the community have faulted the community for its supposedly promiscuous lifestyle, the authors here draw attention to the fact that the freedom afforded came with codes of conduct that were both recognised and followed by its members. So true is also the observation that cocooned in their railway worlds, Anglo-Indians were not far-sighted and so lived for the day, trusting their futures to pensions and provident funds and resting secure in the belief that their sons would also join the railways in the future. Muthiah admits that it was these very same railway people, whom he considered "very special Indians", who were responsible for him wanting to write about the community.

The chapter on *Beyond Home –making*, very similar to Frank Anthony's chapter on Anglo-Indian achievers, does justice to Anglo-Indian women by recounting the roles

played by the prominent ones, from the past to the present times, which contrary to popular outsider notions of Anglo-Indian women, as persons of slack morality, pleasure lovers and scheming wenches, proves that they are made of sterner stuff. While the chapter does not explain why the Anglo-Indian woman decided to or had to leave her traditional role as housewife and join the work force, it does describe her evolution in the work arena from initially being a governess or a teacher, to attaining higher qualifications which propelled many an ambitious woman into commercial, medical, military and educational spheres where she has made a name for herself. Quite an exhaustive list of these women achievers has been provided but one aspect of the community that finds mention in almost all accounts of Anglo-Indians, but is missing here, is the tendency of Anglo-Indian women to be better educated than their male counterparts.

'Search for a Homeland', speaks of the community's proclivity for living along side one another, if not in railway colonies, then near cantonments, and this 'herd consciousness' as Frank Anthony was inclined to say, even prompted them to try and establish a homeland for themselves. Experiments of this kind were carried out in many parts of India, the most renowned being the settlement at McCluskiegunj. There is an eight page pictorial dedication in the book to the McCluskiegunj project.

Part II, which starts with an *Author's Note*, is the second of its kind in the book. Muthiah, says, that in this part, it is his intention to highlight the "contributions that Anglo-Indians have made to India and abroad." Once again readers are taken through history and are given a list of names of prominent men who have served in various capacities under many flags – some very much Anglo-Indian, others whose lineage is not as clearly marked, but all personalities of extraordinary calibre whose names are still spoken of with awe in military, police and administrative circles.

While many Anglo-Indians found it safer to find employment in the government or in business houses, there have been others who dared to venture into 'unchartered territories' as far as Anglo-Indians were concerned – banking, shipbuilding, pharmaceuticals, real estate and, of late, those with initiative have taken to information technology and finance to name a few of the employment sectors. Muthiah's list, as stated earlier, includes immigrants, both men and women, and

extends to their children as well who have carved a niche for themselves in Dubai, Australia, the U.K. and the U.S.A.

Muthiah finds it regrettable, as have many others before him, that few Anglo-Indians took to writing despite being afforded a good education. Here, the author starts with paying tribute to those currently engaged with wielding the pen and moves back in time to earlier writers whose works were mainly restricted to historical accounts of the community. It would have more insightful if Muthiah had delved into the reasons as to why there was such a paucity of literary work, given that the Anglo-Indians did receive excellent scholarship. But if the past lacked men of letters, the present has seen more evidence of writing from Anglo-Indians from all over the world, and the listing in the book is quite a comprehensive one.

If writing has not been the forte of the community, music and dance certainly are. Apart from being a 'natural' part of Anglo-Indian life-style, these musical inclinations took many of its men and women to national and international fame. The stage and film industry in India has had a lot of takers with the first actresses, in India, being Anglo-Indian. Quite a detailed account of these achievers finds mention. From there, the author moves on to describing another all time favourite of the Anglo-Indians, of both the men and the women, – hockey. The game was not only popularised by them in India but several other countries have also benefitted from having Anglo-Indians on their teams. Other field and track events have also had Anglo-Indian participation and Muthiah estimates that few communities in India have contributed in proportionate measure to the field of sports and games as the Anglo-Indian has.

The penultimate chapter, *Leaders of the Pack*, expands on what Muthiah introduced in Part I of this work under the titles, *The Third Generation* and *An Era of Uncertainty* and one wonders if these three chapters could not have been merged to make for easier reading and less repetition or be divided in such a way as to keep early leadership and later leadership apart. In the *Valedictory*, Muthiah sums up the character of the community which not only loved and lived life to the full, but was also fiercely dedicated to work, faith and family. The tribute extends to the present generations too and the book ends with the hope that contribution continues and recognition follows in a country that is slowly emerging as a world power.

The Anglo-Indians. A 500-Year History is a fine piece of reference work as it spans the community from its genesis to the current times. The narration, interspersed with photographic evidences, breaks the monotony of the history lesson that the work is, and with a bit more attention to language editing, and weeding out of repetitions in the forthcoming editions, the book could well go on to being a rich source of information to both Anglo-Indians, few who know of their rich and varied backgrounds, as well as to researchers working on the community.

Cheryl-Ann Shivan (nee Brown) is an Anglo-Indian who is the Principal of a Government Arts and Science College in Pondicherry, South India. She has a Ph.D. in English Literature from the Pondicherry Central University and a Masters Degree in Education. Her area of interest and continued research is Anglo-Indian literature, with special reference to Anglo-Indian women, as both writers and characters, in works written about and by the community. She can be reached at: shivancheryl@gmail.com