



BOOK REVIEW

Curtain Call: Anglo-Indian Reflections

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Kathleen Cassity and Rochelle Almeida, eds. CTR Inc. Publishing, New Jersey, USA (2016), <http://www.blairw.org/CTR/index.php>. 223 pp. ISBN 978-0-9754639-7-0

Curtain Call is the final book in a series from CTR Inc. Publishing spanning the Anglo-Indian community's experience of life in India and the several countries to which its members have emigrated. It brings to the reader a host of reminiscences and reflections from writers of quite varied backgrounds, ages and professional experiences. In style and tone too, these articles vary. Fiction is interspersed with autobiography, essay and research material set in different time frames. The result is a frequently changing perspective and genre that requires some nimbleness on the reviewer's part.

Aware of the multifaceted nature of their material, the editors have divided it into five sections beginning with memories of times past in India and abroad, with special attention given to Anglo-Indian food. Some explorations of the community's history and antecedents follow in the central sections of the book, along with accounts from several writers about their introductions to the countries in which they settled. The last section focuses on Anglo-Indian identity and the future of the community.

Articles in the first two sections of the book provide welcome glimpses into the personal and community life of families in the early decades after 1947. Some reach back, through stories about elderly relatives and forbears to times well before India's Partition and Independence in 1947. These small personal histories give readers a valuable feeling of times past. There is a strong, understandable strain of nostalgia

for the closely bound life of the community in India, where there may have been financial hardship but also a vital link between family, Church and community, in a society made up of numerous social groups in the stream of national life. These are celebratory stories of family relationships and community participation. Food makes up a good part of this celebration: what people cooked and ate in the early days of railway settlements, their cooking utensils and stoves, and how they fashioned a distinctive cuisine for themselves far away from the country of their birth. "The fabric of Anglo-Indian identity is fused together by complexion, creed and cuisine", says Maeve Lobo. "However, it is the food that has been triumphant in bringing the community together" (p.64). In kitchens all over the globe Anglo-Indian food is prepared as before.

In these early histories there are some valuable insights into professional life. In 'A Passage from India' Denis K. Whitworth recounts how his Indian qualifications as an engineering draughtsman secured him a job on his first day in England, whereas the search for accommodation proved much more difficult (pp.33-40). Joyce Mitchell in 'Angels with Wings: Air India's First Anglo-Indian Air Hostesses' (pp.41-45), tells of the first flights of Air India International, set up by JRD Tata, and of the exacting standards laid down for cabin crew. Shanta Benegal's is an interesting contribution from someone outside the community. She describes helping an attractive young Anglo-Indian colleague in her travel agency to escape the unwanted attentions of a male journalist covering the visit of Pope Paul VI in 1964. Ralph Moore in 'The Jewel in the British Crown: The Anglo-Indian Woman' (pp.46-49), elaborates on this theme. Throughout this early segment of the book there are passing references to the prejudice habitually encountered in daily life by Anglo-Indians both in India and abroad. In 'Scholarly Forays: Anglo-Indian Explorations', and in 'Reflections: On Anglo-Indian Experience and Identity', a more searching approach to the problems of belonging and difference in social settings are explored. To reach this point, however, necessitates a backward look through the centuries to the age of European arrival in the subcontinent, and the altered history of its people thereafter.

Two essays in particular are of interest here. They are by Brent Otto and Lionel Caplan. Otto's article, 'Cochin: An Historic Centre in the Anglo-Indian Story,' offers a short history lesson and makes the point that the Anglo-Indian community should

rightfully trace its beginnings to the arrival of the Portuguese in India, and the official encouragement given to relationships between Portuguese men and Indian women, largely as an administrative measure ensuring stability in the work force. Lionel Caplan too points out that the increase in the offspring of mixed unions was brought about through the arrival of large numbers of Portuguese and British men in the mid-seventeenth century, at Fort St George for example (pp.84-85). With the arrival of the British, and similar initial encouragement of unions between British men and Indian women there occurred, over time, formally and informally instituted relationships between the members of three different communities. In Caplan's words: "What is striking is that these two Euro-Indian "streams" – deriving from Portuguese and British forbears – effectively blended, through inter-marriage, into a single population" (p. 84). Caplan goes on to show that inter-marriage between Indian women and men of other European nationalities were also over time enfolded within a single large community. So also, the Armenian community in Madras became increasingly absorbed into the larger Anglo-Indian one in the course of the nineteenth century. Thus, at its very inception the community has been multi-racial. This historical perspective goes a long way towards familiarising Anglo-Indian readers with their own history, a real service provided by the series.

Official histories have little to say about the community, and much writing on Anglo-Indians has been marred by prejudice relating to both race and caste, as well as a growing religious intolerance. The writing of history in this phase of national life in India is being deliberately distorted by political ideology: Rational, factually sound accounts of the past are thus of great value.

Valuable as these insights are, however, the basic realities of life for the Anglo-Indian community hinged on a different estimate of its place in the scheme of things, in post-Independence India. For many Christian communities group identity is all-important, despite inter-marriage and the umbrella of a shared religious identity. Even within India there were differences between Anglo-Indians and other Christian communities more entrenched in their social environment in terms of state and regional identity. This too, Brent Otto draws attention to in his historical essay on Cochin, in the section titled 'Anglo-Indians, North and South' (pp. 107-08).

Thousands of Anglo-Indians left for the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States believing that cultural continuity for them lay in the west, embracing all the hazards and hardships that lay ahead as necessary evils. Harsh economic realities directed these moves, just as the harsh economic and territorial ambitions of colonising powers led to the foundation of the Anglo-Indian community centuries ago. To situate the decisions and fortunes of the community in the light of these realities, uncovering the effects of racism over hundreds of years, and the inadequacy of established history in acknowledging these facts is a welcome endeavour, no matter how long in coming.

Despite the community being small and its body of work not very extensive, the development in recent years of creative writing as well as research is heartening. The development of a strong, original and creative faculty in the work of Irwin Allan Sealy, for instance is in evidence in 'The Man in the Sola Topi'. Many readers would have noted the reference to a projected history of the community with interest. At other times one is aware of an unevenness in the writing in *Curtain Call*, a choice of reticence over engagement with the more negative aspects of experience. Nostalgia borders on sentimentality at times.

With a sense of wonder one realises that four centuries of existence have passed for the Anglo-Indian community. It has been an eventful history. The early years of this century have brought a re-emergence of many old conflicts. The rise of religious nationalism, majoritarianism and associated attacks on the liberal, secular ethos that has been a guiding principle for thousands of Indians are becoming a daily challenge. In the west virulent forms of racism have gained ground to an extent hardly believable. Race, caste and religious bigotry return to centre-stage. These are troubles Anglo-Indians have always had to navigate. Hopefully, more opportunities such as those presented by this series will be made available to them, to write what they know.

Deborah Yadav (nee La Fontaine) has been, and remains, a keen student of the Indian novel in English. Growing up in an Air Force family in India, she has studied all over the country. She was born at the National Defence Academy at Khadakvasla

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