



ANGLO-INDIANS AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Esther Lyons

In this article Esther Lyons discusses her experiences in Australia as an Anglo-Indian with special reference to issues of Anglo-Indian identity.

"What nationality are you?"

"An Anglo-Indian."

"An Anglo-Indian! Who are they? Where do you come from? I have never heard of an Anglo-Indian!"

These are some of the exhausting questions I have had to answer over and over again, since I migrated to Australia. I remember when I first migrated in 1970 to Perth, Western Australia, I was sent to teach at a small town called, Southern Cross by the Department of School Education, a little girl looked at me and said to her mother, "Mum, is she a Red Indian?"

Anglo-Indians were never accepted by the British in India, instead they were used and reared in the atmosphere of trade. In the early years of British colonisation the Anglo-Indians were viewed in a highly favourable light. Their local knowledge of India and its people, "rendered them an invaluable asset to those whose chief concern was with the wealth to be derived from a lucrative trade" (Stark, 1936:27-28). For the British, the Anglo-Indians were created only for their own interest to help in procuring trade and material. They were least interested in what became of them. That was left for the churches and the missionaries, who were only there to voice the opinion of

the British, convert them to Christianity and take care of their souls. The Anglo-Indians were never given the image of a community and presented to the world as such. There were no technical or the extensive media support at the time of the origin of the Anglo-Indians, which could make the world aware of their existence during the British Raj and the colonialism. I have not come across any historical record or documents on the origin or the existence of the Anglo-Indians in India either. Very little is known about the Anglo-Indians, the offspring of the British and the Indian, and their growing up in the Western culture and religion in India. Even after the independence of India, the Anglo-Indians have maintained that heritage of the Western culture and religion much to the displeasure of the Indians.

"I have studied in the convent school throughout where all the subjects except the Hindi language, were taught in English," I said to the Co-Ordinator at Sydney College of Advanced Education in 1983, when I went for my admission to upgrade my Teacher's Certificate, "I am an Anglo-Indian." "An Anglo-Indian!" The Co-Ordinator replied, "Yes, I read about them in Sulman Rhusdie's 'Midnight Children.' I had never met an Anglo-Indian before."

The few books, which have been written and published by renowned publishers, have given some information as to who an Anglo-Indian is, but a lot has to be done to get that image accepted world-wide. To the average Australian, an Anglo-Indian is an Indian because of India being their place of birth.

I once met a young Anglo-Indian teacher desperately looking for a permanent teaching position with the Department of NSW School Education. "Every time I have been for an interview, I have been asked if I could speak English! When I started schooling in Australia itself," He confided in me, "I was only three when my parents migrated to Sydney. I do not know any Indian language at all. Yet the fact that I had to mention that my place of birth is India, they overlook where I am educated and ask me the silly question as to whether I know English!"

I remember once my mother was very sick and I had to call for a doctor after hours. The doctor attended to my mother and then, looked at her critically and said to me, "Is she a Mrs Lyons! She does not look anything like a Lyons!!" Meaning that she

was dark in complexion and nothing like the English name she carried. "She got that name through marriage to a Lyons of course, there are many people with mixed bloods of the British and the Indian." Was my reply, which put him in shame. I have encountered such predicament very often. This is perhaps one of the reasons why most Anglo-Indians feel isolated, and prefer to stay within their Anglo-Indian community.

Even though an Anglo-Indian is always regarded as an Indian by virtue of being born in India, they were never accepted as an Indian in India itself. To the Indians they are always the half-breeds who have no castes, and who once helped in shaping the land along with the British. The Anglo-Indians in India follow the foreign religion and culture of the British whom the Indians pushed out of the country. The Hindu fundamentalists do not want to accept any other culture but Living in isolation and within their own Anglo-Indian community in India, the Anglo-Indians have acquired a certain accent in speaking the English language. Mainly because they have to speak the regional local language with the Indians around them. Therefore, although their English is clear, it has a rhythm of the regional Indian language, which gives it a distinctive accent of the Anglo-Indians.

When I was doing my practical teaching lessons at one of the schools in Sydney in 1984, I had to give a lesson in English to Year 9. I remember the topic was on anthropology. I was very nervous and faltered with some of the words, but the lesson went well I thought, yet at the end of the lesson, the lecturer criticised me about my accent, and not being able to pronounce some of the words accurately. "You cannot teach English in Australia with that accent of yours," he said and failed me.

Many years later in 1989, after I had been teaching for some time in a Catholic school, I applied to another Catholic school near my home. The school I applied to had a high percentage of multicultural students. I am a qualified Special Education teacher, the position I applied for was to teach the children with learning difficulties due to some intellectual disability. The interview was all right and I know I was the only applicant. I was confident about getting the position, yet, I received a letter telling me of my being unsuccessful because of my accent. The principal said that for

the multicultural school like his, he needed a teacher with a perfect Australian accent. I was very disappointed.

When I was leaving India for the first time to visit the USA in 1965, my English teacher, Sister Bernard had said, "Now come back without that 'put on' foreign accent! You have a very good accent of your own, there is no need to acquire something different and lose your identity." I did exactly that, I did not want to change my way of talking. I was happy with my Anglo-Indian accent, it did give me an identity, yet I have had to face disappointment over and over again in my profession as a teacher.

I was a teacher of English for many years in India, and taught in the English Convent Schools and the Anglo-Indian private schools, yet when I wanted to take up English as my major teaching subject for the Bachelor of Education at Sydney College of Advance Education, I was told to choose History instead, because they said that teaching English would be difficult because of my distinct accent, that I would do very well as a History teacher instead with my background. So I majored in History and not English, although I have had to teach English most of time. Neither have I ever had any problems with my students not understanding my accent. "You speak the Oxford English, like Mrs Indira Gandhi", said Dr Wallace Suchting, the retired Reader of Philosophy one day when I introduced myself as an Anglo-Indian. He too had not heard of them but ended up buying Alan Sealy's *Totternama*.

My son who has had all his education in Australia does not have that problem with the accent as I do. He does not speak English with an Anglo-Indian accent. My son and the many other Anglo-Indian children prefer to eat the food, which the other children eat, the fast foods, steaks, fish and chips. But for me those foods are bland and tasteless. Most Anglo-Indians prefer the curry and rice that they ate in India. The Indian films are another of the fancys, which one cannot give up. I have three boxes of Indian films, which I have collected for myself. Even if we do associate ourselves as the descendants of the British in India, we have grown up in India and have acquired some tastes from India, which we find hard to give up. We have developed a culture and lifestyle of our own type, the Anglo-Indian type, which the world is not aware of. We have blended the eastern and the western style of living and culture.

We are a community of our own kind, and we have had to face a lot of prejudices and discrimination both in India and overseas, wherever we have immigrated.

I recently completed my family tree from 1600. My ancestors seem to have come from France and Ireland and settled in America. While I was researching my ancestors, I wondered whether those ancestors of mine would have accepted me because of my pale complexion. Some of my relatives in the USA have very often commented upon my having a darker skin and not white American skin like them. Considering the fact that the Anglo-Indians came into being at the time when there was slavery of the darker skin people by the whites during colonialism, it was not surprising that the British were against taking their offspring born of the native women back with them to England. Colour of the skin seems to be another factor that prevented the Anglo-Indians from being accepted by the British. As British imperialism started to take on a more complex form the British began to get more concerned with the issue of maintaining "purity of race." Which also meant a white Britisher with real English looks. This colour prejudice has continued wherever the Anglo-Indians have immigrated. If they are white with blue eyes and fair hair, they find it easier to blend in with the others but if they are dark like the Indians they find it harder to be accepted as anyone but an Indian. Amongst the Anglo-Indians themselves there is this colour prejudice. The fairer ones consider themselves superior and the real Anglo-Indians. In India the higher castes are usually the lighter skin ones whereas the darker Indians are supposedly the lower castes. According to them it was the lower castes that were converted in numbers by the missionaries during the British Raj. The Indians therefore, consider the Indian Christians as well as the darker Anglo-Indians as belonging to the lower castes.

Most Anglo-Indians immigrated to the western countries for the better future of their children. While in India they did enjoy some respect from the servants and the lower caste of Indians as the sahibs or the descendants of the British who were kind to them. They could afford the luxury of servants and being served, and attended upon, even though they felt they were discriminated against. Unfortunately, they lost that luxury once they migrated to the western world. Some even started regretting the change of residence, and have kept their links with India by visiting the country as often as they can. They soon realised that the discrimination and prejudices against

them are also present in the new country. This time it was not so much for religion or being casteless, but because of skin colour, accent, lifestyle and their being born in India. As in India, the top man in any institution or department, is always the true country born and brought up in pure blood and accent. In India it is the Indian from the distinctive upper caste, and in Australia it is the white man with blond hair born in Australia, with the Australian accent who is the top man. The Anglo-Indian has always been the second class citizen in any country because of their background, distinct Anglo-Indian culture, accent and skin colour. Maybe in years to come this may change with where they are born and how they speak and blend in with the country of birth. But for the time being while there are still many born in India, there is still prejudice and discrimination. The older Anglo-Indians therefore prefer to stay within their own community and cling to their own distinctive lifestyle, a mixture of the British and the Indian. While the future seems promising for the children, the older Anglo-Indians find themselves comfortable in their own community and culture. They prefer to organise for themselves a little India in their own homes and the social get together, 'the way it was in India itself.' They prefer the Indian spicy food and the association with only Anglo-Indians.

Although there are many pure Indian migrants in Australia, the Anglo-Indians prefer their own Anglo-Indian community. The Indian migrants and the Anglo-Indian community may enjoy the same food and films, but they have very little in common otherwise, in fact, the Anglo-Indians have more in common with the people in the West, the Australians, the British and the Americans, mainly due to the common religion, Christianity, they follow. The Anglo-Indians are comfortable in their own Anglo-Indian community, which follows the mixture of the two cultures, the western and the eastern. They have developed their own accented English, their own food habits and tastes, their own lifestyle. All Anglo-Indians, irrespective of their complexion, have their own, distinctive Anglo-Indian culture and are a community, which is so different from their ancestors, the British and the Indian. They have blended the two cultures and formed a culture of their own. They have managed to pass down this Anglo-Indian identity to their children who may speak like an Australian, but enjoy their Anglo-Indian meal of curry, rice, and chapatti.

Even though there are the discrimination and the prejudices the same as it was in India, there is the security and the prosperity of a better future for the children. Anglo-Indians who have settled themselves into some independent business or trade of their own seen to be doing better than those who are employed in an institution of department. The Anglo-Indians are mostly progressive, self-sufficient and adjustable community, they have been able to adapt themselves to the new situation and conditions presented to them in the country they migrated, at the same time keeping the link with the country of their birth.

Esther Lyons is an Anglo-Indian author who recently had an autobiography - *Unwanted - published dealing with her life in India and Australia and the many problems that she had to overcome.* [Email to: Esther Lyons](#)