



ANGLO INDIANS IN THE UK AND INDIA TODAY – 1999

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PREAMBLE

The Anglo Indian community has been the subject of many doctoral dissertations. In fact we know of the existence of at least 9 PhD theses in North America. None has been written by an Anglo-Indian and not one of them deals with the community today. Rather than leaving the community an object of anthropological or sociological curiosity I thought it would be interesting to try and determine how the community is faring today.

During a recent extended trip of two months in the UK and another three in India, I met dozens of Anglo-Indians both in the UK and India and spent an hour or so chatting with them. I followed a loose, but definite format. Interviewees were young and old, rich and poor, educated and not so educated Anglo Indians. We met folks in schools, in their homes, in social clubs and even in slums. We met about 40 persons in the UK and approximately 90 in India. Through these primary interviews we got the history of over 500 Anglo-Indians in these two countries. In addition, in order to determine the reality behind some Anglo Indian stereotypes, we looked at the last ten years of school and college examination results and the last 40 years of marriage records (in Calcutta).

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective was to determine the degree of integration of the Anglo Indian community into the mainstream of England or India. Secondary objectives included developing a projection of how long the community would remain a viable ethnic group and determining the socio-economic level the community is presently at.

AN APPROACH

It will take me a few months to unravel and interpret the many pages of notes I made. And I suspect that more information will be needed to fill in gaps or to establish findings more conclusively. Rather than wait for this process denouement, I thought I would take advantage of memory and momentum and write a summary of my impressions. I would also like to invite interested persons to provide me with feedback, either on my findings or on their own experience and perceptions

FINDINGS

ENGLAND

The first generation:

The Anglo Indian community consists of middle aged (over 40) men and women, most of who were born in India. Almost all are living comfortably, after having struggled in their first years of being immigrants. We heard stories of mistreatment on racial grounds. Most have had or have modest jobs, usually lower in status than the jobs they held in India. Many have retired and live well, enjoying the many benefits the UK provides its senior citizens who are called old age pensioners (women over 60 years and men over 65 years). We met or heard of very few who were in any financial distress. They live fairly insular lives, associating mainly with family members. They maintain low profiles and have conservative social, political and moral views. They talk wistfully of their good days in India, but clearly recognize that they have a better quality of life in England. Many regret at their earlier neglect of their Indian heritage, though not usually to the point of having Indian friends, or adopting any Indian customs, except through attachments to Anglo-Indian food and attempts to trace their heritage. Few belong to clubs, but meet at annual school reunions or Christmas socials. Few of the first generation are involved in activities to help the community in India, perhaps because there are not many organized efforts, the Kalimpong Homes Association being an exception.

The second generation:

Remarkably, all the persons we met of Anglo Indian parents considered themselves British. This second generation speak, act and live like their fellow English.

Regardless of their color, almost all have married English men or women. The only Anglo-Indian thing about them is/were their parents. Many are interested in their family history, not emotionally, but from a curiosity point of view. The younger generation support their English charities without any apparent country bias and so they are not specifically supportive of the community in India. For the most part they work in middle class jobs, are more successful than their parents and live more comfortably. Owning their homes is common. Their friends and social structure is English and they have been accepted at the socio-economic level that they are at. We heard few stories of discriminatory treatment. It appears this first generation of Anglo-Indians have integrated and been accepted fully into the social and cultural mainstream of England. They are comfortable in their environment. Questions like "What do you think of being Anglo Indian?" are met with a gentle, amused "But we are British" answer.

INDIA

Overview:

The Anglo Indian community in India is not as easy to understand or describe as the community in England. There is so much variation in the community. At one end there are the very rich and successful Anglo Indians living in great comfort, and, at the other end, there are the poor and destitute Anglo Indians living in slums. There is no clear demarcation between the generations - there would be about three generations co-existing at present - the old generation over 55, the young generation under 30, and the rest being the middle generation. This of course is the broadest of generalizations. An attempt will be made to summarize the characteristics of these generations, with the full awareness that this is bound to be inexact, and that a proper analysis will have to be made in a more definitive article at a latter date.

The Older generation - over 55 years

This is where the greatest disparity lies. There are a few extremely affluent Anglo Indians, but there are a very large number of elderly Anglo Indians who are destitute and who are living in homes, or, worse still, living in slums or on the streets. India does not have any old age pensions or benefits (there is some government old age grant, but the process of getting it appears to be so difficult, that very few are receiving it). Further not many companies pay life long pensions, most retire their

personnel with a lump sum settlement. Such persons who have retired and who have not been able to migrate are 'stuck'. Their settlements have run out and they are now totally dependent on their children or on charity. Most live on the exploits of their children, especially the ones abroad. (An example was colored photographs of a daughter in California, stuck all over the walls of a hovel occupied by an old lady). They form long queues for receiving free rations or cash subsidies. One can only speculate how these people exist and it is not pretty - a daily struggle for food, clothing and shelter.

The middle generation - 30 to 55 years

Most of this generation was born after independence. The majority of middle class of this population group migrated. With the exception of school teachers, not many have higher education, They have had to struggle, and still struggle to make ends meet. A large number worked in traditional government jobs in the railroads or telegraphs or customs. They mix with other Anglo-Indians, have never learned much about Hinduism or Indian culture and are staunch Christians. They are in a time wrap. Unlike the older generation, they have held on to their rented housing, which, with the huge inflation in real estate, gives them an asset that can be and is exchanged for ownership property -that is, they are given ownership of a new flat when they vacate their rented accommodation. Their old houses are broken down and new high rise apartments built in their stead. They tend to live in localities where there are other Anglo-Indians. Many have capitalized on their knowledge of English by opening English medium schools. Some work in the Gulf States, mostly as teachers, using their knowledge of English. They clearly identify with being Anglo-Indian and are proud of their culture, while somewhat reluctantly accepting that they are Indian too. This is the group that ended the endogamous nature of the community, as approximately 25% to 30% have married persons outside the community. It is their single goal to migrate, as have their friends and relatives, and have a better quality of life. They appear to be too involved in surviving (the old and middle generations) to get into activities that help members of the community. The All India Anglo Indian Association, which is the largest community organization, does sterling work in providing and supporting school education. There are a few large regional community organizations, particularly in the South, but they are also focused on education. There are very few resources to help the old, the poor and

children in slums. Religious groups provide the main source of relief for these groups, but religious organizations are indifferent to community, and with the national pressures of poverty, the Anglo Indian community gets limited help. The affluent members of the community support the community sporadically, particularly during Christmas, but there is little involvement in any organized communal assistance (like the active foundations maintained by the Parsees- a similar ethnic minority) to help the community.

The younger generation - less than 30 years

If there is any good news about the community in India it is in this generation. The usual stereotypes of Anglo-Indians - that they do not study, that the men drink and are wasters and that the women are easily available- do not apply to this group. They are educated to the extent that they have at least a high school certificate and some 25% have a degree. They have grown up with persons from all other Indian communities and have reached a comfortable understanding of their ethnicity and nationality. They know about and accept the religion and culture of the provinces where they live and they are a part of the mainstream. They still recognize that they have a different culture and practice it by speaking English at home (most of them speak a local language fluently), wearing dresses when appropriate, and following many other Western cultural practices - using a knife and fork to eat, observing Christian festivals and so on. They have made the transition from being Anglo Indian to being Indian, without losing their ethnicity. The other ethnic groups generally accept them, although they are still perceived as being 'more different' than others. About 50% to 60% marry persons from other ethnic groups. They have a much better socio economic status than their parents. Quite a number own their homes and these are located in the midst of other communities.

Many are teachers in Anglo Indian schools, rising to become Principals. They are exploiting their knowledge of English by joining a booming tourist industry in the hotel line as managers, chefs, captains and waiters and in the travel line as airline attendants, travel agents, tour arrangers and guides. Quite a few work in the Gulf States as teachers, on oil rigs and in a variety of other jobs. The majority want to migrate to an English speaking country, but this is no longer a trait of the Anglo Indian community - most of the middle class of Indian sub- continent want to migrate

to a developed country. This desire to emigrate does not put their present lives on hold, as they are able to work and advance in their existing jobs, while keeping watch for emigration opportunities. Not many of this generation are involved in helping their less fortunate community members. Perhaps this will change as they establish themselves socio-economically, or it may follow the pattern of India where the middle class are generally indifferent to the plight of the poor?

Again the poor have not been party to any of these developments and remain without skills or education, although, with many Anglo-Indian schools offering free admission, their numbers are reducing.

WHERE IS THE COMMUNITY GOING?

Unlike England where the second generation of Anglo Indian has merged into the cultural and social mainstream of the country, in India there is still a separation between Anglo-Indians and 'other' communities. The older and middle generations that have the pressures of day to day living, have only formal social contact with other ethnic communities, particularly at work, However their friends are mainly Anglo Indian and their culture is still English centered - language, movies, functions and dress.

It is the younger generation that has changed their social and cultural practices to reflect the communities they live in. Their friends are determined by the school/college in which they studied, where they live, and where they work. They are familiar with and participate in local customs and festivals and speak the local language. Their transition has been helped by the trend of educated Indians to move toward a somewhat Westernized culture in language, dress and social norms. There is very little, if any, anatomical or socio-cultural differences between this generation of Anglo-Indians and their colleagues. The only difference is ethnic - their distinct lineage (real or perceived) and this difference is also diminishing as there are a large number of 'out of the community' marriages. This generation appears to be only vaguely aware of any differences between themselves and others, and, on a day to day basis, behave quite naturally as if they were none. It is likely that the children of this generation will be part of the mainstream of the State they live in, with a distinction of being Christians whose mother tongue is English.

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