



BOOK REVIEW

*ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN IN TRANSITION: PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND  
PREDICAMENTS*

Jyothsna Latha Belliappa

Sudarshana Sen, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, 202pp. ISBN 978-981-10-4653-7 (hard over), ISBN 978-981-13-5192-1 (soft cover), ISBN 978-981-10-4654-4 (ebook)

In recent years there has been a growing body of work on Anglo-Indian identity both in India and internationally as evidenced by the number of seminars that have been organised on the subject as well as the submissions to this and other journals. Much of this research has occurred in the disciplines of history, cultural studies and postcolonial (literary) studies, and to a lesser extent anthropology. Amongst those who have turned a feminist lens on Anglo-Indian identity within these fields are Rochelle Almeida, Alison Blunt, Dolores Chew and the writer of this review, however, in-depth, explicitly feminist ethnographic studies have been slow to emerge.

In this context Sudarshana Sen's 2017 monograph offers a valuable feminist understanding of Anglo-Indian women's location within intersecting axes of inequality based on gender, ethnicity and class. Based on one hundred interviews (ninety with women and ten with men) amongst the Anglo-Indian community in Kolkata she explores women's subjective experience of marginalisation both within and outside the community. Sen argues that women are positioned within multiple and intersecting patriarchies which limit their autonomy and life choices.

As an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority Anglo-Indians occupy a marginal position in contemporary India for which Kolkata, a metropolitan city with a colonial past,

provides an interesting ethnographic context. However, the impact of this marginalisation has specific consequences for women who are often caught between the contradictory demands of representing both their community and national identities. Sen suggests that their minority position in an increasingly majoritarian society and existing gender norms in the community makes Anglo-Indian women particularly vulnerable within their families, workplaces and neighbourhoods.

Sen begins by historicising the community's position in contemporary post-colonial India, examining the role of the colonisers in creating the Anglo-Indian community through bi-racial domestic arrangements and later in excluding it from structures of power. She also examines this history from a gendered lens, looking at women's positions in the colonial and post-colonial period. Drawing on earlier feminist research on the creation of a gendered domestic space in colonial Bengal and how women's roles as home-makers and mothers emerged within the colonised nation, Sen highlights some of the ways in which Anglo-Indian femininity was constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She thus provides a context in which to understand women's experiences and positions in independent India.

A key feature of Sen's research is her comparison of two generations of Anglo-Indians one which grew up before the 1970s and the other which grew up in the 70s and thereafter. She argues that the latter tend to be comparatively more integrated with non-Anglo-Indians, although they are acutely aware of their culturally distinctive identity.

The research explores several significant themes including education, family relations, colourism, social interactions and power structures within Anglo-Indian clubs and associations. In relation to education she argues that although Anglo-Indians historically had the advantage of speaking English as their first language, their limited fluency in Indian languages such as Hindi and Bengali undermines their ability to succeed in school and has negative implications for their employability. She draws attention to the shrinking numbers of Anglo-Indian teachers and students within the schools established by the community, which might be attributed in part to large scale migration. She suggests that although Anglo-Indian students have access to scholarships, they are not enough to prevent many from sinking further into poverty.

Sen argues that Anglo-Indian women's traditional occupations: teaching in English medium (Anglo-Indian) schools and stenography are both poorly remunerated jobs with limited growth prospects. While the latter is fast disappearing in the digital era, the former is no longer the exclusive preserve of Anglo-Indians as women from diverse communities now take the B.Ed. degree and are fluent in English. She also suggests that women's limited representation in administrative and managerial roles both in Anglo-Indian schools and in the Council that oversees these schools plays a role in their professional marginalisation.

Sen provides a thick description of Anglo-Indian cultural practices and lifestyle particularly as they relate to the home decor, family life, courtship and marriage. These practices enable Anglo-Indians to retain a sense of distinction before their Bengali neighbours and reiterate their alignment with the West. By continuing these practices from one generation to the next and by marrying within the community (or with other Indian Christians) Anglo-Indian women not only fulfil their gendered responsibility of maintaining the boundaries of community and religion but also re-create a sense of intergenerational continuity and familiarity within their homes.

She suggests that their identification as Western (through dress, speech and mannerisms) can constitute a double-edged sword as women are often subjected to derogatory references such as *tash* (non-traditional) and *memsahib*. Sen argues that the fear of exploitation and marginalisation by mainstream society tends to push women back into the folds of the community and could create conditions for disempowerment within it. She cites the example of clubs and associations where women were till recently excluded from voting rights. In contrast, her male interviewees seem more empowered to integrate with mainstream society through professional and personal relationships and even to marry outside the Anglo-Indian community.

A major strength of the book is Sen's self-reflexive understanding of her own position as a researcher from mainstream Bengali (Hindu) society interviewing and representing a marginalised community. This is evident not only through her own commentary on research relationships in the introductory and concluding sections but also in some of the accounts cited such as those regarding choice of attire (dresses

vs sari) or lifestyle. However, perhaps because of space constraints, her own role as the co-creator of the narratives that emerge is not explored at length. It is hoped that Sen will examine the implications of her positionality in future publications as this would be a useful contribution to feminist ethnography.

The book could have done with a little more stringent editing to delete some repetitions between the descriptive chapters. There is one error towards the end of the introduction where the themes of the remaining chapters are wrongly attributed. Although the descriptive chapters did explore pride, prejudice and predicament, I would also have liked to see a little more analysis provided in the conclusion justifying the sub-title. However, these are minor issues considering the book's valuable contribution towards enabling a deeper intersectional understanding not only of Anglo-Indian women's experiences but of gender and minority identity in contemporary India.

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