



THE ANGLO-INDIANS¹

Irwin Allan Sealy

The Anglo-Indians are the first modern Indians. Before the Victorian Hindu renaissance, before the nawabi itch for things European, before the Frankish musings of the Great Mogul, there has already begun to evolve a heterodox community who will speak the father's tongue and yet eat the mother's salt. The first mother must have felt this alien child move in her and wondered at the future she contained: would the child look like her, she must have asked, or like the father? Or might it be a mixture of both, or something else again?

The first births across the land would have been fraught but novel events. As the novelty wore off, practicalities would have arisen: who would pay for the child's keep? What would he or she wear? Might the father be persuaded to acknowledge his child? If not to take it on at least to take an interest in its progress? But very likely the father had disappeared, moved on with his regiment, or his ship, or his convoy, and every so often in the streets of any city there might appear the startling sight of this cuckoo, a fair-haired child in native clothes.

As Europe's tenure lengthens the numbers of the mestiços increase. During this time such children would be raised by the mother if not taken on by an interested father. But the mixed might presume to seek each other out in marriage and begin a settled existence on the fringe. The pre-modern world is a long way from welcoming affronts to its purities; in the land of ritual purity the hybrids are doubly challenged. They are also a goad to England's conscience. By the end of the eighteenth century, military orphanages have been instituted that take in such offspring regardless of their

¹ A version of this essay appeared in Dilip Prakash's *The Anglo-Indians*, Delhi: Photoink, 2007.

colour. Here the children are housed and taught by the East India Company. They eat with knives and forks, not always a diet the father or the mother would approve; they wear hats. They study and play and quarrel in the foreign tongue. There is no record of their dreams but we might fairly guess that whatever their imagery, they are already in English.

Let seven years pass. The child who was brought in is educated and ready to step out into the world. If it is a young man he will very likely become what is known as a writer, or as we would say today a clerk, keeping books for the Company. But he could just as easily learn a trade such as ship-building, or if he were a ready outdoorsman become a soldier or a surveyor in the same Honourable service. A young woman of marriageable age will immediately find a husband from among the European community where there is no shortage of reluctant bachelors. A European complexion would be an asset, but a dark skin would not necessarily be a liability, for she would meet all the other expectations—of language, religion, and habits—of a prospective husband. Given the high mortality rate among the company's officers, she might even find herself widowed and remarried within the short span of the dreaded "two monsoons", all a resident European in the field was rumoured to expect in a cholera-ridden land. It would of course be tempting for her to reach as high as she could among her suitors and this might see her absorbed into European society without a trace of her origins. It would be harder for the male, especially the dark-skinned male, to compete, in spite of his hat. But the school leaver might equally marry one of his or her own kind, and set up a home in the European manner. In this way a new community, next to but apart from the Europeans, takes shape. In the early years they are called East Indians.

The East Indians are a distinct group of Indians, for all practical purposes a caste, existing in as yet easy proximity to the colonizing race, and distinct from the remainder of the population. They merge, by virtue of their colour spectrum, with Europeans at the fair end of the scale and with their own darks at the other end. Even when the fair go to the fair and the dark to the dark, such is the nature of genes that neither can be at all certain of the colour of their progeny. This may cause anxious moments in the ninth month, but popular novelists have tended to overstate the neuroses involved. The inhabitants of Grey Town, that zone that mediates

between the “white” and the “black” quarters of the new trading cities, have learnt over time to marry among themselves without a thought for the colour their offspring, a disposition most other Indians have still to acquire in the twenty-first century.

It is not their only modern trait. Unlike the mass of their countrymen, the new Indians commonly choose their own spouses and expect and offer no dowry; they do not favour the boy child, lament daughters, or stigmatize widows. They are largely educated, to varying degrees and effect, and unless destitute are imbued with civic notions beyond the mainstream. In religion they follow their fathers and are as pious as any other group in a pious land. But here the shoe is on the other foot. Unlike the others they lack a book. A holy book of their very own, as opposed to the one they share with their fathers. For the sharing, sadly, will doom them to a life of imitation. Any book might have sufficed so long as it were theirs and theirs alone, but in faith as in language they are covenanted. Just as the language they share with the rulers will both guarantee them jobs and keep them dependent, the shared faith is another article of indenture. They will be loyal subjects in this world because even in the next they are in effect one with the master, only less so. They are bound to him as a shadow to the man.

If in manners and morals the crannies, as they were called, modeled themselves scrupulously on the English, it was an imitation not craven or servile but occasioned willy-nilly by the vacuum into which a new thing falls. There was no, or no recent, precedent for this overlapping of Europe and Asia, and any group that sprang from it had to return to either the one or the other for its cultural ballast. Anglo-Indians chose the more modern of the two, a choice other Indians are happy to repeat today. As British rule was consolidated the many European surnames--Portuguese, French, German, Spanish, Italian--were simply markers of origin; one language and its ethos united the community, English. So when they spoke of *Home* they were not being ridiculous; the country they had never seen was the source of all that they valued deeply, while in the only language they spoke, the word *India* was itself still foreign. Their very persons, their lived experience, domesticated both words--and embodied the worlds they stood for. They were foreign and yet native, native and yet foreign, and in that vexed identity lay their double fate.

By the early nineteenth century, they are a separate group recognized as such by both the Indians they have turned aside from and the Europeans they aspire to become, and they are already adapting as a new thing must. Their entire outlook may be governed by those aspirations, their customs borrowed from the land of their fathers, and yet in one regard they have dug their heels into the motherland. Their food, even when eaten at a table, with a cloth, off china, leans heavily to the Indian. This is simply pragmatism at work; foreign foodstuffs, certainly dainties, are for the European upper classes. Even where the cook attempts a European dish the tropical kitchen imposes its regime. True the baker, with his risen bread and cakes and biscuits, has a ready market in the Anglo quarter, but at the same time the Anglo housewife's meat is highly spiced, her vegetables seasoned; the Anglo-Indians are veritable products of the pepper trade. And yet in desserts they take on board extravagances no Indian would recognize. They are becoming something unto themselves.

They are also bound by new grievances, having lately found certain jobs denied them by virtue of their birth. Moreover, although by now endogamous, they still lack a law to govern their civil relations such as marriage. The East Indians lobby without success with parliament, but continue loyal to their side. At length their demands are met: after the Crown takes control of the colony following the mutiny of 1857 they find reserved employment in government services such as the newly expanding railways. They are also engineers on the new network of roads and canals, officers in the post and telegraph services, customs, and police, middle-order functionaries as befits their intermediate position. Protection will lighten their burden but perversely it will also rob the community of its enterprise: from now on until reservations cease in a hundred years, these guarantees of employment will shape their character, fostering a sense of dependency during the British Raj and occasioning the flight of half the community at Independence. It is a mark of their confusion that they do not settle on a name—Anglo-Indian—until just short of the departure of the British, perhaps because they are choosing the very name their patrons are about to relinquish.

But patronage is not the whole story. From early on in their history they began to open little schools all across the country that offered to teach the populace the English language. It is a clouded fact that up to and beyond Independence English was diffused through this country not officially by the Raj, but unofficially by the Anglo-Indians. In just the same way as today an entire cottage industry of “English medium” schools parallels the formal sector in education, historically enterprising Anglo-Indians have, with perhaps greater justification, been trading in their father-tongue. In the century before Macaulay there are records of dame schools run by formidable women from their homes. Nor did such schools vanish with Independence: all through my early childhood in the 1950s my mother ran a dame school in the many little towns my father was posted in as an officer of the UP police. From her the sons and daughters of government servants and businessmen learnt Wordsworth under the mofussil sky. Nor was she alone: to speak just of our family, her sister taught elocution in a small railway town in Bihar, while an aunt on my father’s side is remembered by generations of her students in Lucknow. Of course historically there were church schools as well, and these are the ones that survive, but here too the Anglo-Indian teaching staff invariably outnumbered the British. We forget that it is *their* demotic, not British English, that is spoken in this country today.

Pride of connection blinded the community to opportunities beyond their language. By turns beleaguered and complacent, the objects of prejudice and protection, they found relief in an insouciance whose small pleasures were decidedly conformist. There were always rebels in the ranks, but one might have wished for more: the unity which community leaders still harp on is useful for bargaining (and not least for the leaders themselves) but perhaps a thoroughgoing tradition of dissent would have sharpened the Anglo-Indians’ critical tools and served them better as a group. Once too scattered to combine they are now too few to matter; critical mass was perhaps always beyond them, but the remainder continue to stand for the deracination that modernity demands of nations.

Irwin Allan Sealy is a well renowned Anglo-Indian writer of fiction, including *The Trotternama: A Chronicle (1988)*, a comic epic that tells the story of the Anglo-Indian Community, *The Everest Hotel: A Calendar (1998)*, and *The Small Wild Goose Pagoda: An Almanack (2014)*. He resides in Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand.