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## LIVING STORIES OF ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN IN KOLKATA

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The Anglo-Indian community in India has a marginal, ethnic and minority existence in the social, cultural and political arena. In addition the community has a fairly large diaspora which adds to its socio-cultural uniqueness. No other community of a mixed racial and socio-cultural characteristic such as this has had a continued miniscule existence yet noteworthy impact<sup>[i]</sup> in India or elsewhere. Throughout British rule in India the community took the side of the colonial power in military and political matters and maintained a social distance from 'other Indians'.<sup>[ii]</sup> The attitude towards these other Indians pushed them to a marginal<sup>[iii]</sup> position in India after Independence. The social position of the Anglo-Indians in India was jeopardized on one hand, through a continual reluctance on the part of non-Anglo-Indians to consider them as one of their own, and on the other, reluctance by the Anglo-Indians to consider India as their motherland.

This community in India, which is officially recognised as a minority community, is privileged with, among other things, the running of their own schools. The community has nearly sixty-eight such schools in West Bengal at present. These schools provides enrolment privileges for the children from the community and make certain special arrangements such as lower tuition fees, books, and uniforms for these children. One very important aspect of the identity politics of this community is that the children of Anglo-Indian women who have married non Anglo-Indian men are not officially recognised as members of the community. A result of this is that such children are not allowed to receive any special arrangement<sup>[iv]</sup> made available from the community for its children. Moreover this way of defining identity is a patriarchal issue in that it recognizes only the father as the origin of the cultural, ethnic and genetic lineage of the children, which is still inaccurate even just on biological

grounds never mind cultural ones. This identity issue is not discussed here, however, as I shall limit myself to discussing Anglo-Indian women in this article.

Anglo-Indian women are not distinct or different from the men of the community in terms of culture and ethnicity. But they may at times be different from the men in their beliefs, fears, anxieties, and the ways in which they are stereotyped. Moreover their social position vis-à-vis the men are also different in some significant ways: for example, it is the women of the community who have enjoyed greater public visibility.<sup>[v]</sup> The older generation of mainstream Bengalis would remember Anglo-Indian secretaries they had met, perhaps when sitting in an interview room. Her efficiency, her accented English, her diction and moreover her fair skin, her frilled frock, her red lipstick made her 'sensuous and beautiful'— different and distinct from the other women of India. Their uninhibited negotiations with men whether as private sector employers, or as colleagues, or as clients have marked them off from their traditional and shy Hindu counterpart. Anglo-Indian women have wittingly or unwittingly created an impression to their Hindu Bengali middle class women contemporaries of being better empowered to negotiate with patriarchy. This paper will explore two cases of Anglo-Indian women from two different social backgrounds and personal history. Both have experienced struggles of some kind yet they each represent a very Anglo-Indian culture.

In 2008-2009 I carried out research exploring the lives of Anglo-Indian women in the city of Kolkata. The particular areas in the city where the data was collected were the traditional places of residence of the community; for example, Bow Bazar, Park Circus, Park Street, areas surrounding Esplanade, Elliot Road, Creek Row, Ripon Street and also areas like Behala, Dum Dum, slums in Tiljala, Khidderpore, Central Kolkata etc. I selected one hundred Anglo-Indians to survey and interview, out of which ninety were women. I had selected the respondents through snowball sampling as the community based enumeration had stopped since the 1951 census, so it was too out-dated to be used to assist with sampling. I focused on Anglo-Indian women from two groups with the 1970s acting as the dividing point; that is, the two groups consisted of Anglo-Indian women born before and after the 1970s. This decade was very significant in terms of the community in India. It was the time when most of the members of the upper stratum of the community had emigrated,

especially to Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Blunt 2005, Caplan 1996). It was also the time by which community reservations in certain public sector jobs had ceased to exist. As the reservation ceased in stages throughout the time from Independence till the decade of 1960s it was in 1970s when it completely stopped. Therefore the social situation for those who remained in India during the decade was different from what it had been, and in many cases, more difficult.<sup>[vi]</sup> Those who were born before the 1970s would be in the age group of 40 or more in 2009 (the time at which the data was collected) and those born after 1970s would be in the age group of less than 40. The sample of ninety Anglo-Indian women comprises of fifty-two Anglo-Indian women of the younger generation (less than 45 years of age) and thirty-eight from the older generation (more than 45 years of age). Therefore here the age of 45 is considered as the pivot of comparison. This piece illustrates the lives of two Anglo-Indian women living in Kolkata today. They were born in India after 1970, after the decade which had witnessed the final phase of mass emigration of Anglo-Indians from India. However, it is the class position of the two Anglo-Indian women which is the most significant point of difference between them, as their stories illustrate.

#### LINDA'S STORY<sup>[vii]</sup>

Linda was born in the 1970s, the eldest child of her parents. Her father worked as a superintendent at a factory and her mother was a secretary. She was sent to a Loreto School, because her parents wanted her to get a good education in English and wanted her to be in an environment of English-speakers. Loreto schools, like others that are classified as Anglo-Indian schools in West Bengal have reserved places for Anglo-Indian children. Her parents also wanted her to be in a school with a good reputation, where she would meet other Anglo-Indian girls. She did become friends with two other Anglo-Indian children. At school, she also received religious instruction in Catechism classes. Her parents were satisfied with all this.

One day when she was in her early teens, the Principal of her school, a nun, asked all the pupils in her class to wear saris, to welcome a guest who would be coming to the school the next day. Linda did not have a sari at home. Her mother wore frocks and so did she. Among her Anglo-Indian neighbours also, she could not find a red-bordered sari -- the kind that had been specified by the school. Her mother, who

busied herself at home after her day's work in office mostly mingled with family members and rarely met and spoke with non-Anglo-Indians in the neighbourhood. Her father, who was more sociable and had many friends in the area, thought it would be improper for him to ask to borrow a sari. Linda had no choice but to go to school the next day in her uniform. Her father accompanied her, re-assuring her that he would meet the Principal. Her father went with Linda to the Principal's Office. He asked the principal why she had insisted the students wear saris to welcome a guest, in particular, why she insisted on saris as appropriate for welcoming a guest in India when there were different communities who have distinct styles of dressing. He took the example of his community, where wearing a sari was not considered 'their way of dressing', yet he knew that he was as Indian as any other citizen of the country. Linda's father and the Principal argued but neither one could convince the other. The outcome was that Linda was offered a transfer letter. She left Loreto and received admission to another school. Later in life, Linda became a journalist in a leading newspaper but could never forget the fight her father had had with her Principal. Being required to wear a sari, something that might have been minor from the point of view of another student, was for Linda and her family an issue of community identity. Linda still thinks it was proper for her father to have raised the issue which, for many, might seem very trivial. Nowadays, she is comfortable in any clothing and has some saris in her wardrobe. But she has never worn them in family get-togethers or any ceremony of significance where most of the guests would be Anglo-Indian. She prefers to wear a sari at her office gatherings where it makes her blend in with those who are not Anglo-Indian.

At the time of the field work, Linda was in her early thirties, and was going to marry an Anglo-Indian man she had met. It had never occurred to her to marry out of the community. Her fiancée, who was the same age as Linda, had fewer educational qualifications than she did. However he had a good job in an office, and earned enough to support a family. Her choice of marriage partner was probably based on a self-perception, fostered by her father from an early age that she was 'different' from the non-Anglo-Indians she met at school, college or office. From the sari incident, Linda felt that she was made painfully aware even though a citizen of India, by being Anglo-Indian, she was looked at differently by 'others' for not owning a very common

Indian dress. This left a deep imprint on her personality and the subsequent choices she made in life.

Once Linda started working, she got her own flat, near where her parents lived. She looked after her grandmother, who came to live with her. She had always wanted to emigrate, but feared that she might be considered Indian and suffer prejudice, because of her skin complexion and black eyes. She thought that being 'Indian' in a foreign country would be worse than being an 'Anglo-Indian' in India.

### AMELIA'S STORY

Amelia was in her late thirties. She worked as an attendant in an Anglo-Indian Old Age Home in Kolkata. She lived nearby, in a slum. She requested a personal interview in her home. However, there was little privacy. The flat was crammed with furniture, leaving no place to entertain guests. She shared her two-room flat with her husband, parents, brother, sister-in-law and all their children. Amelia has two sons. One left school early because he did not wish to study but preferred to earn. Both the boys had been sent to La Martiniere School. Her younger son remained in school, but after he failed the same class twice, he was made to leave the school and went to Park English School. Amelia worked to support her sons and her ailing husband. Her parents were also completely dependent on her and her brother.

Amelia had matriculated, but did not go on to get any particular training. Training of any kind would have helped her to be skilled. By the age of twenty-two she got married and went and lived with her husband in a flat they rented. Her husband worked as a fitter. He insisted that Amelia stay at home and not work outside, even though they were not very well off. Her eldest son was born. A year and a half later she got pregnant with her second child. And then disaster struck. Her husband met with an accident on the job that left him paralyzed. The company her husband was working for blamed him for the accident and washed their hands of any responsibility. Amelia was devastated as she had nothing left to support her and decided to return to her parents. Being Anglo-Indian, she could avail of the quotas in Anglo-Indian schools, and was able to get both her sons admitted to a good school. Amelia's choice of school was guided by the greater possibility of her children getting admission there. Also, like Linda's parents, she thought that being among Anglo-

Indians would help her sons get a better sense of their community. She had also been educated in Loreto, and wanted her sons to get an education in a missionary school as well. However, things did not turn out the way she wished. Her sons could not cope with the tremendous peer pressure. Most of the children in the school came from affluent English-speaking Indian families. Her sons living in a slum could not adjust with their peers, teachers and the general environment. Moreover they did not have as much opportunity for making friends from within the community at school as she had imagined. None of her sons met any Anglo-Indian children in their classes or in classes higher or lower to them. In addition, she could not arrange for tutoring for her sons, which most of their classmates were getting. Consequently they struggled with their studies. As she was now working outside all day at the Old Age Home, she did not have the time to sit and help them with their school work.

Amelia wanted her sons to continue with their education. She recognized the importance of getting a good education, especially the impact it had later in life when one was looking for decent employment. For her, she felt that being fluent only in her mother tongue, English, was a very big handicap, and had limited the possibility of her working in Homes that were not Anglo-Indian. Her sons, however, have quite a number of friends outside the community and are quite sociable. She understands the need for education but she thinks her sons are too young to give education the needed priority. Though she continually conveys to them the need for education, she thinks they are 'more Anglo-Indian' in this respect. They want to earn early in life (even though her younger son is still in school), as did her husband, brother and herself, for that matter. It was her conscious decision to leave education after matriculation (i.e. completing secondary education, class 10). Her sister too had not studied much. In fact she had left before completing matriculation. However, now she gives tuitions to pre-school children and earns a small amount and therefore has a choice or option. She thinks every Anglo-Indian enjoy a sense of freedom of choice.

## CONCLUSION

These narratives represent different life-experiences, but convey perspectives on life shared by the majority of Anglo-Indians, across social classes, who I interviewed for my study. The Anglo-Indian community at present lives in the city where there is a

cosmopolitan culture and globalized presence of different brands of consumption and visions. In this milieu the urban middle class, lower middle class and poor Anglo-Indians respond differently but what makes them unique when compared with the non-Anglo-Indian women of other communities in the city is that they represent a unique culture. They aspire to be known and understood by 'others' as different but still belonging, yet they encounter obstacles in the perception or image that other Indians have of them. The history of the community, their long association with the British, and misunderstandings of them by other Indians have created inaccurate perceptions that resist change.

The story of Amelia, for example, is a story of a poor Anglo-Indian woman in a Third World city struggling to come to terms with the challenges of life. Amelia is different from any other poor (non-Anglo-Indian) Indian woman because she was able to send her sons to a reputable school which would be a dream unlikely to be realised for any other poor Indian woman. But if we see this story against the background of the history of the Anglo-Indian community in Kolkata, we can understand her ordeal and how poor, less educated Anglo-Indian women struggle. The English language, the western culture, their community feelings, endogamous marriage choices (or at least a situation where choices are limited), and their struggle against a stereotypical image all merge together in the picture of their life in the city. Amelia's place of residence and the kind of social environment she is in constitute an impediment for her sons to be taught in a reputed school like La Martinere. This school is one of the elite schools of the city where many upper class Bengali parents send their children. Her children find it difficult to adjust to the two different environments they see at school and at home. Though the school has provisions to admit Anglo-Indian children poor Anglo-Indian children still face obstacles to their learning in such schools. Moreover the language which the Anglo-Indians consider to be their own, and which acts as a marker of their identity in India also may not benefit them in this environment. The children in such schools are required to study three languages up to a stage after which they can take up two languages out of which one is English. But Anglo-Indian students historically did not prioritize learning other languages. This is illustrated in Amelia's story where her sons are not able to cope with the pressure of learning three languages, one of which is particularly unfamiliar to them.

Compared to this the story of Linda was that of affluence but her cultural attributes drew her to a point where she understood where she stood in the social milieu, in a context that is very different from her cultural practices at home. In the case of Amelia, she is a poor woman who is an Anglo-Indian and in the case of Linda she is an Anglo-Indian who is middle class. It means for Amelia her poverty is more significant in her life than being an Anglo-Indian and for Linda it is her Anglo-Indian identity that is more significant to her than her other identities of class and status. Though they belong to two different strata of Anglo-Indian society their distinctiveness as Anglo-Indians come through their sense of belonging to their culture and heritage.

Though there seemed to be little knowledge about the history of the Anglo-Indian community among the women I interviewed, they had a strong sense of identity as Anglo-Indian, especially with regard to language. They felt proud to be Anglo-Indian, and often described themselves as 'different'. Despite class differences and the circumstances that the vagaries of life have dealt them, both Linda and Amelia share the uniqueness of an Anglo-Indian cultural ethos. Their sameness in acting, thinking and feeling has united them in being Anglo-Indians of Kolkata.

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## NOTES:

[i] The community enjoys the privilege over all other minority communities in having representation in certain State Legislative Assemblies with high numbers of Anglo-Indians, and representation in Parliament.

[ii] The term 'natives of India' during the colonial rule included the Anglo-Indian community but as a community they did not accept this and often made a distinction from the non-Anglo-Indians calling them 'natives'.

[iii] Marginality here means social and cultural marginality, of not being part of the decision-making process, of showing little dominance and exercise of will to change and construct.

[iv] Such as providing books and subsidies in tuition fees etc.

[v] Anglo-Indian women were the first native born women of India to work outside the home and become real breadwinners for the family. They were more 'visible' in public than other women of India in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

[vi] It was especially difficult on two grounds. One, is that many of the upper class or stratum of the community had migrated leaving behind middle to lower stratum of the community in India. Two, with minimum to very little education, competing against fellow Indians to get a government job it was difficult for the members of the community to scale the social ladder and move higher up in the hierarchy both within the community and in the wider society.

[vii] All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.