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## THE ANGLO-INDIANS: 'HOME' IN AUSTRALIA AND THE DILEMMA OF IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

*The Anglo-Indian, as a distinct ethnic identity, was the product of the racialised social hierarchies of British India. Set off from the Indian majority by the community's claims to British heritage, they were, because of their mixed ancestry, never accorded full status as British. At the end of British rule, their anomalous status was confirmed in certain protections, including employment quotas, enshrined in the Indian constitution. Despite this, the Anglo-Indian community in India declined in the decades after Independence as many chose to leave. Climate, proximity, and the country's British roots meant that many considered Australia a desirable destination. This paper focuses on the concept of 'home' in relation to the Anglo-Indians as transcolonial migrants in Australia. It explores the constructions of identity and the possibility of identity dilemmas among the Anglo-Indians as transcolonial migrants in a multicultural Australian society.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of colonial rule, it was difficult for Anglo-Indians to answer with certainty the question: 'Who am I?' Set off from the Indian majority by their claims to British heritage, they were, because of their mixed ancestry, never accorded full status as British. At the end of British rule, their anomalous status was confirmed in certain protections, including employment quotas, enshrined in the Indian constitution. Despite this, the Anglo-Indian community in India declined in the decades after Independence as many chose to leave. Climate, proximity, and its British roots meant that many considered Australia a desirable destination.

This paper initially outlines how the Anglo-Indians originated. It draws attention to the

dimensions in the constructions of identity. In particular, it focuses on whether Australia is 'home' for the Anglo-Indians. This is a crucial question for Anglo-Indians, many of whom migrated to Australia during the White Australia policy, but also in the context of Australia's contemporary Multicultural policy. Finally, it explores the possibility of identity dilemmas among the Anglo-Indians as transcolonial migrants in multicultural Australian society.

## EMERGENCE OF THE ANGLO-INDIAN COMMUNITY

In his article on *The Shattering of Cultural Identity among the Anglo-Indians in Rural India*, Professor R Wright points out:

The sub-continent of India is a most noteworthy example of multiculturalism, a blending of heterogeneous groupings that over its history has been witness to a variety of colonial dominations and subsequently a variety of cultural modifications of what might be considered traditional or indigenous. Along with numerous near-cultural invasions (e.g., Indo-Aryan) the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British were the dominant European powers that colonized India and subsequently had dynamic influence on the history of India. Many forms of Indian art, language, religion and literature eventually blended these diverse cultures and became one of the most heterogeneous entities in the world (Wright, 1997, online).

Wright emphasises that wherever there was colonialism, the domination of the military, administrative organization, technical assistance and industrial base was usually achieved and perpetuated by males of the dominating nation. He adds:

A natural consequence was that these males sometimes married local women and formed a family but more often had numerous sexual liaisons without the formality of marriage. In either instance, numerous populations of mixed children emerged. A number of social responses could be anticipated, ranging from acceptance to ostracism. In India a more rigid caste system prevented the child from easily entering back into the local population. Except during the reign of the Portuguese the child was seldom embraced with enthusiasm by the father's community. Thus, the mixed populations of India tended over time to form together and develop a unique collectivity, becoming known as the Anglo-Indian Community of India (Wright, 1997, online).

Varma in his acclaimed book on the Anglo-Indians writes that the Anglo-Indians were "The legacy of Europeans' commercial and political enterprise in India, resulting in the inevitable co-mingling, many a time illegitimate, between European men and

Indian women" (Varma, 1979, 1).

The Anglo-Indian was thus the product of the confident European expansion of the 16th century. The Anglo-Indian, as a distinct ethnic identity, was also the product of the racialised social hierarchies of British India. Varma points out that:

One of the important causes of the race consciousness is that 'people identify'. They look upon themselves as belonging to a certain group. All the achievements of the group as a whole can, thus, be looked upon, according to W.C. Boyd and I. Aismor, as the individual's own accomplishment and 'he can glory in them.' There is no proof that a particular group can produce people of only great qualities or of only worthless aptitudes. People of different shades of worth and capacity, good and bad in various degrees, are produced by all races. This evident fact notwithstanding, unfortunately, many people believe that there is something good about being pure and something bad about being hybrid (Varma, 1979, 2).

Varma writes that racial superiority has had many manifestations, as seen in the devised institutions like 'gotra' and 'varna' in Indian caste society. Moreover, he writes:

The crux of the racial prejudice is 'the urge to dominate'. The other side of the same coin is the apprehension to be dominated, outclassed or outnumbered...The same racial prejudice has in a way created the Anglo-Indian community and has 'perpetuated', as is admitted by L.M. Schiff, an English Christian missionary, 'a crime which can hardly be equalled elsewhere'. C.N. Weston's assertion that the British were directly responsible for the emergence of this community can hardly be disputed...If human beings were treated as individuals and classes instead of fanatically categorising them in communities, there would be no victims of unfounded racialism, as Anglo-Indians were (Varma, 1979, 3).

## IDENTITY

One of the problems the Anglo-Indian community has always faced is the question of identity. It was difficult for them to answer with certainty the question: 'Who am I?'

Charles Taylor (1994) in his influential essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, emphasises the demand for recognition that is linked with identity in relation to a person's understanding of who they are and what are their defining characteristics as human beings. Taylor writes that the effects of being given recognition or its

absence, often by the mis-recognition of others can be detrimental to a person or group of people who suffer real damage. He points out that there is a close, dialectical relationship between a notion of 'inwardly derived, personal, original identity' and the 'vital human need' for the public recognition of that identity within a given society. According to Taylor, "Identity is who we are and where we're coming from." (Taylor, 1994, 33).

In reference to Taylor's essay, Appiah (1994) clarifies that the identities Taylor discusses are 'collective social identities', namely, the identification of people as members of a particular gender, race, ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Each person's individual identity has two dimensions: the collective dimension (the intersection of collective identities) and the personal dimension (intelligence, charm, wit, etc.), which is not the basis of collective identity (Appiah, 1994, 51). These collective dimensions provide scripts, that is, narratives of people's life plans or life stories as with women, Catholics, Jews, blacks, etc. These life scripts are often negative, and have obstacles to, rather than opportunities for, living a socially dignified life and being treated as equals by other members of their society; e.g., the negative recognition of a black identity by 'white society' in the United States. The demand for political recognition is to construct positive life scripts in place of the negative ones. Specifically, it requires that one's skin colour, one's sexual body is politically acknowledged for collective identity (e.g. multicultural identity).

In the light of Taylor's writings, we may ask whether the Anglo-Indians can possibly even desire to retain their self-identity as Anglo-Indians? And how is their collective identity as the Anglo-Indian community affected? How fully can they identify with their adopted country? How much of their Anglo-Indian self-image do they retain? For Anglo-Indians who left India and settled abroad, does the problem of identity arise again?

In this regard, Wright notes:

The Anglo-Indian community fought hard to define themselves in a very specific manner, tracing their heritage along the male side of the family. Once winning that right it became necessary to maintain clusters of the population large enough to continue that heritage. When the numbers dropped because of migration or self-definition, a point was reached where the social, cultural, and social - psychological identities could not

be maintained. Internationally there is a community that meets in various countries, celebrating the identity of being Anglo-Indian. In some countries, enclaves and formal as well as informal groupings have emerged to provide both a critical mass as well as a means for perpetuating identity (Wright, 1997, online).

When the British left India, leaders of the Anglo-Indian community like Frank Anthony, president of the (Delhi-based) All-India Anglo-Indian Association in the post-World War II period, looked for opportunities to resolve this conflict of identity. Anthony (1969) called upon his community to be Indians by nationality and Anglo-Indians by community. However, many Anglo-Indians were unable to resolve these issues of identity. Moreover, Anthony titled his book *Britain's Betrayal in India*, and perhaps this caused them to feel insecure and opt to leave India. For those Anglo-Indians who stayed behind, the Constitution of India provided more security than they dreamt of. The official definition of the term 'Anglo-Indian' accepted by the Government of India in the new Constitution of Independent India is:

An Anglo-Indian means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India, and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only... (The Constitution of India, paragraph 366).

India's Independence and the hand-over of political power in 1947 had its impact on Anglo-Indian identity. It was after the departure of the British from Indian soil that the Anglo-Indians were left without the protective umbrella of the British Raj (rule) and involved critical choice making for this community. They experienced the insecurity of a minority group, and thousands of Anglo-Indians left India and migrated to countries like England, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

## ENGLAND AS 'HOME'

According to Varma (1979), one of the most complex and critical problems in human history has been the problem of living as a minority. Varma strongly claims that most of the problems of the Anglo-Indians were the product of the colonial British Raj whose leaders served the interests of their own class. He concludes:

Thus Anglo-Indians, disowned by the English and alienated from the Indians, drifted for centuries with no moorings, in the vain hope of reaching the English shores.

Thrown repeatedly back to the midstream, they reached home (England) badly shattered, but fortunately with enough life to survive and recuperate (Varma, 1979, 4).

For Varma (1979) the Anglo-Indians were victims of dilemma and indiscretion throughout their existence. The fact that Anglo-Indians were Indian nationals by birth but culturally oriented to Britain often made their status confusing to themselves and to others. Gist and Wright (1973) write about an Anglo-Indian school principal in Calcutta who related the dilemma of her own identity as her heart being in England but her responsibilities in India, and after India's Independence she migrated to Great Britain.

According to Wright:

During the time of the British rule in India many Anglo-Indians looked toward England as 'home', although many of them had never been there. Just as expatriated British citizens continued to look toward England as their native land, so did the Anglo-Indians in their emulation of everything that was European. Even today one will often hear some older Anglo-Indians make reference to 'home' when talking about England, but more and more they have been forced to dispense with that construction of national identity and turn toward India (Wright, 1997, online).

Hence, India's Independence had diverse effects on the Anglo-Indian community. In this regard, Bose (1979) writes that some of the Anglo-Indians who stayed in India integrated well into the upper class Indian Hindu society.

About Indian society, it is important to draw attention to Srinivas's theory of Sanskritization in reference to the Indian caste system. This theory propagates the hypothesis that people at the lower ends of the caste hierarchy could attempt to move upwards, by adopting upper-caste norms, values and practices (Srinivas, 1969). The Anglo-Indians, whether they liked it or not, were residents of India. It is possible that through adopting upper class practices in order to move upwards they would have a higher status and superiority within Indian society. This phenomenon was summarized in Lewin's (2003) writings as the concept of 'passing', which was a covert way of assimilation.

On the other hand, there were many poorer Anglo-Indians who were left with their

memories of past glories and a fondly created illusion of England as their 'home' (Bose, 1979).

Avtar Brah (1996) comments on the concept of 'home' in relation to migrants in general, who cling onto the memories of the life they were accustomed to and bring these memories into their life in their country of migration. Brah explains this sense of 'home' that the Anglo-Indians had for England in the context of migrant communities. England was not, however, any of these things to the Anglo-Indians – their everyday dwelling was in India. Their 'home' was spatially distant, and England was imagined as being their 'home' in that sense while their friends and 'significant others' were situated in a geographical space that was not 'England' but 'Anglo-India'.

In this connection, this paper explores the concept of 'England as the mother country' and whether Australia is 'home' for the Anglo-Indians. Do they still consider England as 'home', or after migrating to Australia have they come to regard Australia as 'home'?

#### AUSTRALIA AS 'HOME'

In their book *Social Change and Cultural Transformation in Australia*, Jamrozik, Boland and Urquhart (1995), writing about the Australian search for identity, note that from the start of the Australian immigration program in 1947, cultural transformation has been simultaneously occurring along with technological social change, especially in social change of the class structure. This cultural transformation has been multidimensional and more extensive where Australian-born people have had direct contact with immigrants in everyday life. As a result of the social change, the class structure and the varied extent of cultural transformation in that structure, Australia has become a society of cultural diversity but directed by a monocultural structure of power which is deeply embedded in the British or Anglo-Celtic tradition. Jamrozik et al point out that the core institutions in Australia carry this monocultural inheritance as 'colonial baggage' or 'colonial ballast', which makes the Australian search for identity a laborious process (Jamrozik, et al, 1995, 207, 208).

Jamrozik et al (1995) also point out that the dilemma for Anglo-Australians is how to develop an Australian identity without weakening the Anglo-British inheritance, and

without contamination by non-English cultures. In contemporary Australian multicultural society there is more than one cultural inheritance; and hence the cultural inheritance of Australian society can no longer be described as solely British or Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic. In reality, England is no longer the only 'home' because Australians now have many ancestral homes, and Australian society is much richer for it (Jamrozik, et al 1995, 215).

Jamrozik et al conclude that if multiculturalism is to become a social reality in Australian society in all aspects of social, political and cultural life, then ethnic communities need to integrate their own cultural heritage with the Anglo-Celtic heritage. Reciprocally, the Anglo-Celtic inheritance will need to be 'diluted' with the inflow of the new cultures. In aiming to remove the division between the 'Australians' and 'multiculturals', they acknowledge Smolicz's concept of an overarching umbrella of values drawn from the core values of various ethnic communities. And the search for a new identity, which would reflect the social reality of contemporary Australia, will need to focus on the essential necessity of transforming the core social institutions, which continue to present a monocultural image of society (Jamrozik, et al 1995, 224).

Modestly, it is possible to explore responses to the question: 'Who am I?' among the Anglo-Indians in Australia. Furthermore, is there a possibility that Anglo-Indians see Australia as their home and do they have a sense of belonging in Australia? Is this feeling of 'home' a result of their identification with Australia and Australian Anglo-Celtic traditions? In short, in the country they chose to migrate to, do they identify with their 'Anglo-Indian' heritage or their newly acquired 'Anglo-Australian' homeland?

According to Wright:

Over time, Anglo-Indians settled into all parts of India, travelling far beyond the railroad setting and urban enclaves that we have come to associate with their heritage. It became very common to find Anglo-Indians in any part of India and indeed in any English-speaking community of the world. Canada, Nigeria, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia have become new homelands over the fifty years since India became independent from England (Wright, 1997, online).

The Anglo-Indians, although a numerically small component of Australia's post-war



migrant population, are sociologically unique and interesting because of their origins as an early transnational community (Caplan, 1998), formed across the boundaries of race, colonialism and globalisation. Caplan stresses that the process of moving across cultures or globalisation is not new and that the Anglo-Indians were one of the early results of the globalisation process. Hence, it is not only the withdrawal of Britain (returning 'home') that sparked their migration, but even before they migrated they lived in this liminal space. The Anglo-Indians are a particular kind of (trans)colonial subject wherever they were. They did not feel that they belonged in India and were a diasporic community. These concepts are linked with the Anglo-Indian community in this search for identity and a 'home' in Australia.

In Australia, there have been studies of how the Anglo-Indians have assimilated and gained economically (Gilbert, 1996; Colquhoun, 1997). Adrian Gilbert (1986) in his writings about the perceptions of Anglo-Indians in Australia, Canada and England came to the following conclusion:

The loss of what were caste markers in India, such as the English language, the Christian religion and a Western lifestyle, has meant that AIs in Australia are substantially less likely to view themselves as a group apart. Further, other Australians are less likely to view them as being different. The greater openness of Australian society and the acceptance of multiculturalism has made it possible for the AIs to be accepted on their merits. (Gilbert, 1986, Online)

In a recent work, Colquhoun conducted a series of studies and focussed on the adaptation and well being of Anglo-Indians in Australia. Colquhoun's findings suggest that, for the Anglo-Indians, adaptation to life in Australia overall had been achieved fairly easily. However, it is interesting that the Anglo-Indians saw themselves as different from other ethnic minorities in terms of being Western and having English as a first language. The participants also reported that life in Australia had been different to India. Unlike India, they felt Australia placed less emphasis on a person's status, religion or social functions. It was again interesting that they saw the differences between Australia and India as those same indicators, which defined them as a community. Without those indicators, it would be difficult to distinguish them from many Australians today. (Colquhoun, 1997, Online)

Colquhoun's study thus points to the fact that Anglo-Indians, through their easy assimilation, would feel at 'home' in Australia and identify with the Australian Anglo-Celtic traditions.

Writing about 'skin colour', Adrian Gilbert (1996) points out that while many Anglo-Indians are physically indistinguishable from Anglo-Celtic Australians, many others are not and consequently became victims of discrimination and prejudice. The White Australia policy was starting to change during the 1960s but there were occasions when different coloured members of the same family could not enter Australia. (see also Lyons, 1998). Alison Blunt writes that Anglo-Indians could migrate to Australia from the late 1960s as they looked culturally European, but after they arrived they were often perceived as Indian. (Blunt, 2000)

According to Gilbert (1996), in colonial society it was the white-skinned Anglo-Indians who would have been capable of passing themselves off as British that had, or could expect, better job opportunities and class privileges. He writes that the issue of skin colour is of particular relevance to the Australian Anglo-Indians, who have varied skin colour, while they assimilate into Australian society. This paper acknowledges Gilbert's contributions and explores skin colour in relation to constructions of Anglo-Indian identity and identity dilemmas in Australia, as these Anglo-Indians assimilate into Australian society and make Australia their 'home'.

## THE DILEMMA OF IDENTITY

As Anglo-Indians range from fair to dark in complexion (Gilbert, 1996), this paper explores the possibility of an identity dilemma among the Anglo-Indian community in Australia. Do they experience dilemmas of identity in their quest for identity in Australia and, in particular, the Australian monocultural power structure (Jamrozik, Boland & Urquhart, 1995) embedded in British or Anglo-Celtic traditions?

Lewin (2003) points out that ethnocentric patterns prevailing in India maintained a specific boundary between the Indian and Anglo-Indian communities. Lewin's study focuses on the identity of Anglo-Indian women in Western Australia. In her study, some participants were conscious of the racist attitudes toward the Indian ethnic communities in India that had been manifested in Anglo-Indian identity, through ignorance of Indian culture, a disregard for the ethnic groups that surrounded them in

India, and a belittling of the Indian ancestry that was a part of the Anglo-Indian identity. While many of her interviewees worked against this notion, Lewin found that the problem was not totally overcome as, evidently, the preoccupation with skin colour led dark-skinned relatives to be identified more readily as Anglo-Indian than fair-skinned ones.

Blunt's work on Anglo-Indian communities in India, Britain and Australia explores the geographies of home and identity, and studies the ambivalent place of Anglo-Indians in 'White' Australia. According to Blunt (2000), even as transnationals Anglo-Indians have to identify with their 'Anglo' heritage', resulting in possible identity dilemmas in multicultural Australia. This paper seeks to acknowledge the dilemmas or 'tensions' according to Blunt (2000, Online) of these diasporic Anglo-Indians who identify as Anglo-Indians, as British, as Australians and as Indians, keeping links with their country of birth, as seen in Lyons (1998).

The Anglo-Indians have been studied in terms of race, and concerns have been raised about whether it is a dying race or whether its survival is an ethnic myth (Mills, 1998, Williams, 2002). Regarding the survival of this community, their assimilation into Australian society may result in the construction of new identities (Eade and Allen, 1999), along with identifying with the country of their birth.

Thus, migration and assimilation of these diasporic Anglo-Indians may have resulted in the construction of a number of different 'Anglo-Indians' (Lyons, 1998), and new identity dilemmas while seeking 'home' in Australia.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper explored the concept of 'home' for the Anglo-Indians in Australia. The identity constructing process is made difficult by the different senses of what it means to be an Anglo-Indian engendered by transcolonial migration and diaspora. Even as transnationals, Anglo-Indians have identity dilemmas within multicultural Australia corresponding to their assimilation and identification in the places of their migration. Is this reflective of the fact that some Anglo-Indians have made Australia their 'home' and feel they belong here in Australian Anglo-Celtic society?

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