

---

## UNFAIR ATTITUDES

Rudy Otter

I am delighted to report that skin colour means nothing to Anglo-Indians these days, thank goodness.

We are no longer knocked out by the sight of white complexions, as we used to be in India, way back in the early-to-mid-1900s.. We have evolved into sane and sensible people who judge others of any colour by deeper criteria — their character, personality, education, intelligence, manners, abilities, talents and a range of other yardsticks.

You might say Anglo-Indians today, wherever we might be, are definitely “off colour”. It is an enormous achievement of which every one of us should feel truly proud.

But how did we (or more correctly our ancestors) come to attach so much importance to complexion in bygone times in India? Why was it automatically assumed that a “fair” person was superior to a dark one? How was this despicable myth allowed to flourish for decade after decade unchallenged?

I would say it probably had something to do with the way the original Anglo-Indians (the white male settlers from Britain) instinctively viewed the offspring of their marriages or liaisons with Indian women. If a child were born white, it was assumed that it would probably be “like its white father” and “think white”, which included being “reliable, honest, trustworthy, a born leader” — all traits unquestionably deemed to be the exclusive preserve of white people.

If, on the other hand, the child were born dark, it was assumed it would probably be “like its Indian mother” and “think Indian”, including being “unreliable, dishonest, subservient”. How stupid we were in those days! How ignorant!

I am convinced, however, that something along these lines must have formed the

basis of the scandalous colour-conscious attitudes that existed for so long, prompting Anglo-Indian parents to scream at their children: “Don’t play in the sun! You’ll get black!” As though having a tanned skin would automatically consign them to the lower echelons of society.

Let us rewind for a moment. As I have said, the true Anglo-Indians were British settlers in India, including the offspring of those settler marriages. But when British settlers married or formed liaisons with Indian women, their offspring were Eurasians.

Unfortunately many Eurasians came to be disliked by the settler Anglo-Indians as well as the Indians. Incensed at being treated badly by both sides and dubbed “half-castes”, the Eurasians appealed for what they regarded as an upgrade; they too wanted to be known as “Anglo-Indians” — a move that infuriated the white settler Anglo-Indians of those bygone times. Eventually, however, they relented. That is how Eurasians were magically transformed into Anglo-Indians, an “upgrading” they craved.

I believe that at least 95 per cent of Anglo-Indians today (including myself) actually have a Eurasian background.

In the early-to-mid-1900s, most Anglo-Indians would have sworn they came from pure British stock all the way down the line, and would bring out a folder bursting with faded documents and photographs to prove their British or European lineage, proudly declaring that their British-born great-great grandfathers held high-ranking positions in the British Army/Air Force in India, and their great-great grandmothers “came out to India” from England.

This is where the importance of skin pigmentation came in.

Having achieved Anglo-Indian status, we felt we had to justify our “elevation”. We had to prove that we were as British as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Had you asked the “newly elevated” Anglo-Indians of those bygone times about their Indian ancestry, they would have denied any links with Indians. “We are actually British through and through,” they would proclaim, their chests swelling with pride.

Many years ago I remember watching a British television documentary which followed an elderly Anglo-Indian migrant and his British-born grandson to India to trace their ancestry.

The pair were filmed in a cemetery where the tombstones were dotted with English, Scottish and Irish names, but they could not find the graves they sought. Quite innocently the grandson remarked: "Grandpa, we're having no luck tracking down our British ancestry. Let's trace our Indian ancestry instead."

The crestfallen look on the old man's face said it all!

No Anglo-Indians (I mean "upgraded" Eurasians) of that bygone era rushed to research their Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati or Muslim great-grandmothers; it was something they preferred to ignore completely for the reasons I have discussed.

Well, we can only shake our heads in disbelief at those ancient attitudes which have long been gathering dust in the annals of Anglo-Indian history. How different, how very mature and enlightened we are today! (By the way, in my opinion the Anglo-Indian community now includes Goans, who, like Anglos, have mixed European ancestry, in their case Portuguese. We are all part of the same great happy Anglo-Indian community spread all over the world,)

Alas, although Anglo-Indians have overcome that deplorable colour-conscious outlook, I am afraid that skin colour still seems to matter a great deal to Indians living in India today — where "fair" equals "desirable". It's the same old story.

Have you seen those matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers littered with the word "fair", which is intended to improve the advertiser's prospects of finding the right partner? "Hindu accountant, fair, seeks bride..."

Some Indians describe their complexion as "wheatish". In other words they are saying: "I am not exactly fair — actually I'm a bit on the dark side — but I hope you will still find me attractive enough to marry." Many Indians have been known to use skin-whitening substances in an effort to "upgrade" their social standing and impress everyone.

Quite pathetic, isn't it?

How absurd it would be for a company to advertise for staff in a similar manner. "Clerk, fair, needed for travel agency" or "Blue-eyed bus driver needed for weekend shifts". Or "Sweeper, fair, required for hotel forecourt". Or "Undertaker, ginger hair, needed for busy firm".

I repeat: what, for heaven's sake, has the colour of one's skin, hair or eyes got to do with acceptability as a spouse, a person, a human being?

Nothing whatsoever.

If Anglo-Indians can overcome colour-consciousness with such astonishing and heart-warming success, I am sure Indians could do so, too, if they wished.

But it would not be easy, as we know only too well.

**\*\* Rudy Otter** is a retired Anglo-Indian journalist. His email address is: [otterrp@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:otterrp@yahoo.co.uk)