



BOOK REVIEW

Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in South Asia: Race, Boundary Making and Communal Nationalism

Dolores Chew

U.E. Charlton-Stevens, Royal Asiatic Society Books. Routledge, 2018, 321pp. ISBN 978-1-138-84722-4 ((hdbk); ISBN 978-1-315-72691-5 (ebk)

U.E. Charlton-Stevens presents a political history of the emergence and development of the Anglo-Indian¹ community through the vagaries of European colonialism in India, South Asia and to some extent Burma/Myanmar. As the title of the book indicates, the community and those who assumed the reins of leadership, grappled with a variety of challenges and in the process arrived at points – hotly debated and contested within the community – of identity and place, that were shaped by political realities of the day. Nomenclature of the community, who could or should be included within it, responses to official policy shifts that moved goal posts, the yo-yo like, unequal, fair-weather treatment at the hands of colonial powers – embrace, expulsion, recall, toleration as subordinates on sufferance, trapped betwixt and between colonizer and colonized (the analogy ‘shooting fish in a barrel’ comes to mind) and differing perspectives among the colonial elite, are all carefully presented to the reader. They are framed by the author with the following understanding: “the ‘problems’ of those of mixed race lie not in the mixed themselves, but in the social boundaries and attitudes to which they are subjected and expected to conform” (p.8).²

Dr. Evelyn Abel’s *The Anglo-Indian Community. Survival in India* (Chanakya), a history of the community from its inception to the post-independence period appeared in 1988. Three decades later, her narrative has been significantly amplified

and updated by Charlton-Stevens. The book follows a familiar chronology, emergence and development of the community right up until the immediate post-independence period, which affords the reader the opportunity to make comparisons, identify trends and get a better appreciation of the strategic deployment of resources by community spokespeople and leaders – not all in agreement – at different historical moments. Where Charlton-Stevens breaks new ground in the writing of Anglo-Indian history is with the attention he gives to wider debates in the Indian sub-continent leading up to the British departure and the discussions about the future of minority populations, including the Constituent Assembly documents where he demonstrates how these debates had repercussions for the Anglo-Indian community. This makes a valuable contribution to Anglo-Indian Studies, but also more generally for those interested in the run-up to Independence, Partition of the Indian sub-continent and minority communities. For example, it adds an interesting dimension to the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate. For those interested in Anglo-Indian history of the period there has been the writings of Frank Anthony³, then Abel's book and now Charlton-Stevens who in addition to providing us a very comprehensive study, addresses existing lacunae that had existed in previously published histories of the community, especially of Anglo-Indians as participants in the framing and discourse of nationalism in India. He entertains diasporic considerations as well, and includes in his evidence and discussions, the growing body of work on Anglo-Indians, as well as on race and colonialism, especially with regard to South Asia. Most importantly however, what he does is situate Anglo-Indian history firmly within the history of the Indian sub-continent. So while some might slot it into the sub-category 'community' history, he clearly demonstrates the relevance of 'micro' histories for getting a comprehensive appreciation of the colonial encounter in the Indian sub-continent, as well as in the negotiations leading up to independence and the emergence of the post-colonial state.

The book which began as the author's doctoral dissertation is energetically and meticulously researched, with extensive archival work and the most recent scholarship, including unpublished doctoral and master's theses. It has six chapters, an Introduction and an Epilogue. In his Introduction the author cautions the reader to avoid a common pitfall when doing historical research – exploring the past through contemporary lenses.

The risk here is that we adopt a celebratory tone about the theoretical potential of hybridity to satisfy our own purposes in the present, rather than doing detailed case studies that interrogate what hybridity has meant in practice. ...much earlier scholarship sought to understand them [mixed race populations such as Anglo-Indians] via problems assumed to be inherent rather than situational. (p. 6)

He raises another flag about steering clear of “ethical or value judgments”. Rather, the object of his enquiry is status change and identity affiliations over time (p.14). However, as a reader I’m not sure whether one can remain dispassionate in light of the evidence presented.

The Epilogue deals with imperial retreat and “the final phases of decolonisation”⁴ (p. 257). Here as elsewhere in his book, we find the author’s engagement with the mixed race population in Burma/Myanmar. This is not usual in books on Anglo-Indians, even though Burma and India were administered as one entity (from 1886-1937) by the British and the term ‘Anglo-Indian’ was often used in Burma for its mixed race population. Later, however, for political reasons, they chose to identify as Anglo-Burman. The leaders of the community had to reconfigure nomenclature in line with changed political realities when Burma came to be administered separately from India by the British, and definitely later with the rise of Burmese ethno-nationalism. This was also the case for Anglo-Indians who lived in what became Pakistan, some of whom started to describe themselves as Anglo-Pakistani. In fact a constant in the book is how nomenclature continued to evolve and adapt to the needs of the day. (See the paragraph below.) A richness of the book is the parallels and comparisons drawn by the author from elsewhere, such as the USA. While the book is to a large extent a political history of the community, he does not neglect socio-economic aspects that are intrinsic to the narrative, such as the economics of marginalization or gender. The chapters also take up the threads identified in the sub-heading of the book – race, boundary making and communal nationalism.

Charlton-Stevens uses his sources to present the deftness with which community leaders at different points in time strategically deployed boundaries to demarcate an identifiable community, as well as the rationale for doing so. The boundaries shifted, expanded, got blurred and at times resulted in changes in nomenclature – Eurasian, Indo-Briton, Domiciled European, Anglo-Indian – in the service of making the most of “cultural and social capital” (pp.19-22). Part of what the reader comes away with is

an appreciation of how the community acted to define itself. One of the many places we see this is in the section that deals with the petition that John Ricketts carried to London on behalf of the community in 1829. Charlton-Stevens provides evidence of attempts to deny legitimacy and authenticity to Ricketts as a classic divide and rule maneuver, to nullify Ricketts' efforts to constitute the mixed race community in India into a political group. He concludes that despite this interference, the early action by Ricketts was successful and bore fruit later in the century (p.55). Readers learn how paradoxically, but not unsurprisingly, group "identity and membership were fostered and strengthened in the dynamic interactions between the minority groups and the colonial state", and not just for Anglo-Indians but other minorities, such as the Sikhs (p.114). What is also useful is learning how colonial administrators and officials were not always in agreement concerning Anglo-Indians. So while overall decisions seemed based on what was expeditious and cost effective for the colonizer, the choir didn't all sing from the same score, Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay's (1827-30) Phoolshair initiative being a case in point.⁵ On the other hand, we learn of preemptive action to muzzle possible political mobilization by the community, as when the Government of Bengal in 1910 conveyed its preference was "to shape Anglo-Indian communal efforts towards its long-standing preference for philanthropic activities", with the consequence that "[s]uch rules retarded...Anglo-Indian political organization" (p. 146).

The insecurity felt by the Anglo-Indian community is effectively conveyed throughout the book. Their situation is analogous to that of children who have unpredictable parents who hug them one moment and slap them the next and so live in a continual state of uncertainty, subject to whims and actions they cannot control. At the same time there is a need for preparedness, for contingency. So also with the Anglo-Indian community and the variety of responses to their situations – fight or flight; colonization or emigration; Europeanize or Indianize. As the twentieth century progressed the community strove to limit its vulnerability to the shifting sands of the political landscape and to navigate a "position between imperial loyalty and professed sympathy with nationalist aspirations to ultimate self-government" (p. 148). This resulted in re-positioning and alliance-making, as well as changes in terms of direction and nomenclature between leaders like John Abbott and Henry Gidney, some of the wrangling being rather bitter.

A fascinating section of the book deals with colonization as a strategy for self-sufficiency and community preservation in anticipation of looming but yet-to-be specified political changes. Despite Charlton-Stevens' comment above about how it is problematic to bring contemporary lenses to view the past, it's impossible in our era of post-colonial studies to not see the irony in a group that has been marginalized by the colonial encounter, seeking to ameliorate their situation by advocating colonization to their own ends, in the sub-continent or the Andaman Islands! We also learn that unsurprisingly, but from our contemporary perspective nevertheless still startling, the Zionist settlement of Palestine provided inspiration for some Anglo-Indian colonists.

Perhaps most noteworthy in all the positioning of the community in response to its changing fortunes, was the indefatigable work of Frank Anthony. Charlton-Stevens demonstrates how despite some of the community contestation he faced, it is Anthony's pragmatic vision and efforts that created the realities that still govern the lives of Anglo-Indians in India. Even today Anthony remains a controversial figure in the community, but even his critics must acknowledge that he lobbied eloquently, indefatigably and ingeniously to win recognition from the dispensation of the day for Anglo-Indian community distinctiveness as something complementary for Indian nationality!

One aspect of the Anglo-Indian experience that historically has received scant attention is class. While colonial authorities expressed concerns about the problem of poverty and indigence among European and mixed race populations – the 'Eurasian problem', it has usually been from the perspective of letting the (colonial, European) side down; showing weakness, pricking the White superiority and invincibility balloon. However Charlton-Stevens, early on in the book, invites us to ponder whether Anglo-Indians read the disadvantages they experienced as socio-economic/class or racial (pp.11-12), and it is hard not to recognize the intertwining of power and socio-economic positioning in the colonial venture in the experiences of the Anglo-Indian community. Boundaries are a major theme of the book. Earlier, in the era of 'White Mughals' there was toleration of porosity of racialized boundaries. Later when this fluidity became unacceptable for the imperial enterprise, Anglo-Indians were caught in a pincer. The hierarchies of race and power are very palpable in the book. Colonialism and imperialism were founded on notions of civilizational

superiority and so when push came to shove, it was inevitable there would be a jettisoning of what was deemed expendable, including people. Race becomes a reason for their exclusion, even as it was used to justify lower salaries. Cost-effectiveness was always key in colonial decision-making (p.39). And very useful here was the 'scientific' legitimating of earlier colour prejudice, bolstered in the latter part of the nineteenth century by the emergence of scientific racism. Add to this illegitimacy, which, Charlton-Stevens asserts gets "deployed as a marker of inferiority", and you have a value system that gets largely "internalised by Anglo-Indians themselves", which can explain some of the writing even of eminent Anglo-Indians such as Herbert Alick Stark and Frank Anthony.

It was the elaborate socioracial hierarchy of British rule in India that created such contradictions; where fighting for one form of equality meant further privileging oneself in relation to the great mass of a subject population. (p.138)

The development of scientific racism, eugenics, the application of anthropometrics and its relationship to socioracial hierarchies are explored in detail. Of interest here is Charlton-Stevens' inclusion of the writing by Anglo-Indian author Millicent Wilson. She applied eugenicist thinking to argue for the inherent superiority of Anglo-Indians and in somewhat convoluted fashion pointed to how they could move to becoming "pure blood", i.e. white (pp.194-5). The book dovetails analytical categories, race and class and invites a nuanced understanding of these complex realities, including that of 'racial passing', something that I've been cognizant of and which is very useful in understanding aspects of Anglo-Indians' historical realities.⁶

A happy moment for me as I read the book was when the author expressed sentiments similar to my own on gender constructions of Anglo-Indians (Chew, 2002).

Rather than denying any empirical basis for negative stereotypes, we should instead focus on the diversity of lived experience, and recognize that the way in which various behaviours are inflected and perceived says more about those who deploy and instrumentalise stereotypes than the behaviours themselves. ...Rather than be drawn into representing Anglo-Indian women through the negation of negative tropes, we should seek to explore the richness and diversity of their lived experiences. (pp. 124-5)

A further richness of the book is the author's comparisons with experiences of mixed race descendants of Europeans in other geographical areas. As already noted, he looks at the Anglo-Burmese experience in some detail, including his observation about how Anglo-Indians benefitted from the relatively more inclusive dominant nationalist construction of post-colonial India. And that in fact Anglo-Indians could be seen as a "model minority in the Nehruvian project of civic nationalism and democracy" (p. 28). Further, in terms of the comparative value of the text, Charlton-Stevens gets the reader to appreciate that while the focus of his book is the Anglo-Indian community, their lives are set against the backdrop of global colonialism (the New Imperialism) and there are similarities in the experiences of marginalization of racialized populations as evidenced during World War I, or with the poor in Britain. For example, we read how hard work was promoted as a deterrent to perceived profligacy (p.70). Also what was deemed appropriate education for those deemed racially inferior – vocational rather than academic. This was directed towards Anglo-Indian children by some. In addition to what Charlton-Stevens wrote we know they were by no means unique as we find similar thinking with the advocates for residential schools for Indigenous children in the Dominions, or the education Black children were subjected to in apartheid South Africa. When I read of Anglo-Indian efforts to form a Force in World War I was reminded of other racialised aspects of World War I, as with the ardent desire of Black Canadians to serve in that war and the official discouragement they faced, based on openly racist characterizations of their abilities. Or Indian soldiers who were initially sent to the Western Front, but within a year were withdrawn and deployed to Mesopotamia for fear of the subversive potential of Indian soldiers fighting alongside white soldiers and deployed against white opponents. The assumption was that in Mesopotamia fighting alongside brown soldiers against brown combatants, there would be less likelihood for them to get any ideas that could undermine the fabricated racial hierarchy of colonialism. It was only when the casualty rates soared and there was a need for more men as cannon fodder, that racial barriers were pushed aside and the Anglo-Indian Force was permitted.

Charlton-Stevens acknowledges that his textured appreciation of the politics of race has been enhanced by the "historiography of race in America". (p.xv) This would be an apt point to highlight the section of his book devoted to the Anglo-Indian biologist,

scholar and propagandist for pan Coloured unity and solidarity, Cedric Dover (1904-1961); and the latter's association with W.E.B. Dubois, the civil rights activist and Pan-Africanist. At a time when race and colour were so omnipresent in the lives of Anglo-Indians and there was a keenness for boundary blurring, Dover's perspectives and his disregard of any colour bar is especially noteworthy. It expands Anglo-Indian history beyond the performativity of fitting in, passing and negotiating the inbetweenness of colonial racialized realities. It speaks to an awareness of shared experiences of colonialism, imperialism and racism and opens up potential avenues for further research and connections in the diasporic communities of South Asians in various parts of Europe, Canada, USA and Central America at this time, such as the Ghadarites. It is also interesting to read in one book about Dover who attacked contemporary Nazi racial theories, and Wilson who held eugenicist views on race, as it demonstrates heterogeneity in Anglo-Indian thinking on race!

Henry Vivian Louis Derozio (1809-1831) is curiously absent from Charlton-Stevens' book. Since the engagement (or lack thereof) of Anglo-Indians with nationalism is a constant in the book, some consideration of Derozio would have been useful, especially as, in the words of (Derozio scholar) Rosinka Chaudhuri, he gave "one of the great speeches of national awakening ever to have been made in modern Indian history" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 83). His absence from a work where the author reveals an exhaustive awareness of everything pertinent to his topic, in print or in archives is particularly puzzling, because Derozio fits the narrative that Charlton Stevens has meticulously constructed.⁷ Derozio presents in some ways an earlier form of Anthonyism: identification with the mother country, albeit with significant differences located in his temporal context. Their modus operandi may have been different, tempered to some extent by the times in which they lived, Anthony exuding pragmatism and "forensic" determination (p. 227), with Derozio being political and poetic. Differences no doubt could also be attributed to the fact that Anglo-Indian identity formation at the time of Derozio had not yet gone through the multiple iterations it did over the next hundred years and into Anthony's time.

As Charlton-Stevens brings to us the heated debates occurring in nationalist fora on reservations versus separate electorates, we become privy to how Anthony was able to grasp their various implications and exploit them to the community's advantage. Anglo-Indians were not 'Hindus' so there could be no fear of them splitting that vote.

At the same time, they comprised a distinctive community. Also, granting special consideration to Anglo-Indians did not seem to hold a threat of opening up any future Pandora's box, once it became clear that Muslims would get separate federated geographical areas, and later, a separate country. Moreover, we find the innovative use of the term 'communal'. While utilized in South Asia, predominantly with respect to religious groupings/communities, when applied to Anglo-Indians it had a certain resonance with nationalist mobilization at the time.

In his chapter "The 'Eurasian' Problem", Charlton-Stevens references Edward Said. "Unlike Said we are here concerned not only with their truth effects, persistence, and what they tell us about Kipling and colonial British attitudes, but also with the relationship of the imagined Anglo-Indian to the real Anglo-Indian" (p.85). The author's need to distance himself from Said in this regard is curious. In fact an important contribution of Said's is the way in which he demonstrated how the imagined (in colonial/imperial construction) was transposed onto the real, and the impact that has on the lives of the colonized. As well, Charlton-Stevens, had written (again with reference to Kipling), "which, like the Raj, he represents as a timeless and natural order" (p.84). This was another one of Said's important assertions about the mythical imagining and creation of a "timeless" Orient; one that does not exist!

At another point in the book, talking about race and its connection to class, Charlton-Stevens draws a distinction between the British notion and the Marxian one. He states that with the former, class is something "immutable", but for the latter it is "analytical" (pp.89-90). His differentiation is not clear and could do with some elaboration and explanation, since, on the face of things, it would seem that socio-cultural aspects are always intrinsic to 'class'.

As I read *Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in South Asia* I experienced anger and despair at the vulnerability of Anglo-Indians through history and the manner in which they had been used and abused in the colonial venture. At the same time I also had a deep admiration for the resilience of the community, its agency and actions to shape its destiny and its creativity and ingenuity in contending with the continuous hurdles that were thrown at it, at some times more effectively than at others. Anthony's working to secure political representation and employment reservations

sheds useful light on wider discussions in South Asian history regarding electorates and separate representation. There is a dovetailing of national imperatives and his persistent and strategic work to secure this. *Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in South Asia* is a compelling and commanding book. It foregrounds and centres the Anglo-Indian historical experience and locates the history of Anglo-Indians squarely within that of modern South Asia. This book makes a valuable contribution to the growing field of Anglo-Indian Studies and should be required reading for anyone entering the field. It will also be of interest to scholars of mixed race studies, race and colonialism and the history of modern South Asia.

Dolores Chew teaches History and Humanities at Marianopolis College, Montreal, Canada. She is also a Research Associate of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.
d.chew@marianopolis.edu

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¹ Unless another author is cited, all page numbers in parentheses refer to the book being reviewed, U.E. Charlton-Stevens, *Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in South Asia*. Also, in this review I use the term 'Anglo-Indian' throughout, unless I am writing about a specific time period and nomenclature that was used by the community at the time. .

² The quote is one cited by the author from Jill Olumide (2002), *Raiding the Gene Pool. The Social Construction of Mixed Race*. London: Pluto Press.

³ Most notably, Frank Anthony, (1969). *Britain's Betrayal in India. The Story of the Anglo-Indian Community*. Bombay: Allied Publishers.

⁴ Perhaps 'withdrawal' would be a more accurate description. Though the author may have deliberately chosen the term most in use by all sides at the time of the withdrawal. Similarly, with the author's use of 'Cambridge Senior/s' instead of Senior Cambridge, in this case possibly an earlier usage/form that I am unaware of. (pp.16; 108; 114).

⁵ This was about training young Anglo-Indians as agriculturalists and horticulturalists.

⁶ Charlton-Stevens acknowledges Dr. Jeevan Deol's suggestion that he explore racial passing.

⁷ See my treatment of this in Dolores Chew, (2015). "Implanting Nationalism, Problematizing Anglo-Indians." *International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies*. 15:1, pp. 34-54.