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WHICH EURASIANS CAN SPEAK?  
ELITE POLITICS, THE LOWER CLASSES AND CONTESTED  
EURASIAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historic identity formation of the mixed-race Anglo-Indian community and its fault lines, through a poem entitled *The Eurasian Anthem*, which was published in a colonial journal in 1826. By examining the anonymous authorship of the poem, its form, historic context and resonances, what emerges are the hidden power dynamics between elite and lower class Anglo-Indians. The carefully crafted collective Anglo-Indian identity put forward by the poem is directed towards colonial authorities, making it an unmistakably political tract in its time. The class and power differences among Anglo-Indians that our exposition of this poem reveal constitute an early example of how the Anglo-Indian identity project would always be politically consequential and internally contested.

INTRODUCTION: POEM, QUESTIONS & ARGUMENT

In the April 1827 issue of the *Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, a metropolitan British publication with colonial circulation, amidst articles about African and Indian colonial economics, war stories, and parliamentary politics, we find a curious tract entitled “The Eurasian Anthem.” The *anthem* portrays Britain’s colonial project in India as a heaven-ordained duty and a civilizing mission, the execution of which the mixed-race Eurasians are preeminently suited agents – equal partners with Britons. Rarely is a forceful claim made unless its acceptance is in question, and the

case of “The Eurasian Anthem” is no exception. This poem bears witness in its lines to some of the suffering, anxieties and political aspirations of Eurasians in the 1820s, in relation to the larger political debates of the decades straddling the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, over the morality of empire, the relationship between Parliament and the East India Company in the governance of British India, and whether British law ought to operate on the same principles in the colonies as it did in the metropole.

The following is reproduced exactly as it appeared in the original publication, the *Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, v. 13, April 1827, p. 17.

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### **The Eurasian Anthem**

*To the Editors of the Oriental Herald.*

Sir, --In requesting the insertion of the enclosed lines, which are dedicated to the British Nation, I beg to inform you that they are the production of an Eurasian, \* a young man, who has been perfectly blind since he was ten years of age.

A SUBSCRIBER.

Madras, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1826.

*To the British Nation, but to the Imperial Parliament in particular, the following lines are humbly dedicated by their depressed Descendants in the East Indies.*

When Britain, from the azure sea  
 First rose, the Land of Liberty,  
 This was her great commission:  
 ‘Go forth to India’s distant strand.  
 Subdue and civilize the land.  
 And better her condition.

And when thou art established there,  
Grant her thy laws, dispense them fair,  
    And bless the sable nation;  
To all and each extend thy grace.  
    But chiefly to an unborn race,  
    That shall be called Eurasian.

Allied to both the black and white,  
They shall both interests unite,  
    And form the central props  
    Of all thy future ample sway  
O'er this bright region of the day,  
    This land of golden crops.

With haughty hearts, and souls of fire,  
    To equal rights they shall aspire.  
    And equal honours too;  
Nor should'st thou disallow their claim,  
    For, recollecting whence they came,  
    They shall demand their due!

Such was the great commission given  
To Britain, by the voice of heaven:  
    Bear witness, church and state!  
    Let her fulfil the high decree,  
    Writ in the book of destiny.  
    Th'unerring page of fate.

Nor let her more affect to scorn.  
    But play us fair in India born,  
    Nor the great work delay;  
For since we are her flesh and bone,  
    Now let her make us all her own,  
    And join us in her sway.

Thus let her prove that she is just,  
A faithful guardian to her trust,  
While every true Eurasian,  
Obliged by more than filial ties,  
The bulwark of her power shall raise  
Against each hostile nation.

All hail to Britain and her laws!  
Heaven prosper India and her cause.  
All hail to both the nations!  
As Britain, so let India be,  
A land of equal liberty,  
To Britons and Eurasians

\* This is one of the most popular terms by which the mixed race, descending from European and Asiatic parents, are distinguished.

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While the message of the *anthem* is loud and clear, the identity of the messenger is not. Whose voice do we hear? Whose views are these? Who penned this poem? On what authority are these sentiments asserted as the voice of Britain's "depressed Descendants in the East Indies"? Is the author the unnamed blind Eurasian young man the Subscriber claims him to be? (an orphan perhaps?) – an archetypical subaltern who succeeds despite the odds, due to a sharp wit, talent and tenacity? Or is the blind Eurasian a fictitious identity, crafted by an elite individual (the "Subscriber," perhaps?) or group of wealthy and well-educated Eurasians, intending to cast Eurasians in a positive light on a public stage to show they deserve equality with Britons? What may this open question of authorship, voice and position reveal about power relations within the Eurasian Community? Is it a community at all at this stage? If so, who gets to speak for them?

Answering any of these questions and appreciating the complexity this *anthem* reveals about Eurasians in the British Empire first requires some historical contextualization. Eurasians had been proscribed by the East India Company's legal and employment policies for over a generation, since 1785. This was the result of a pan-colonial fear of *mestizos* simmering for several decades in the European corridors of power. As a consequence, Eurasians in the 1820s began a period of intense organizing—especially in Calcutta, but also Madras and Bombay—to demand redress from Parliament of their grievances against the Company. These efforts resulted in several deputations and petitions of the East India Company and Parliament: 1827 (Madras), 1829 (Calcutta) and 1830 (Bombay).<sup>1</sup>

Already long established was a tension between Company and Crown, the Board of Directors of the Company and Parliament. The East India Company had faced stinging criticism for the rapacious practices of the 'nabobs' of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in increased parliamentary oversight, and Edmund Burke's flamboyantly prosecuted corruption trial of the former governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings.<sup>2</sup> In these tumultuous political waters Eurasians sought to shore up their position socially and politically. *The Eurasian Anthem* is a unique, distilled reflection of the discourse among (at least a subset of elite) Eurasians about the tenuous position in which they found themselves in the 1820s, and the ways in which they carefully crafted their relationship to the colonial state, to British values, and explained their hybridity as an asset and not a curse.

This paper will argue that the *Anthem* is a prescient characterization not only of what would be a longstanding discursive project of Eurasians, but also equally enduring questions of voice and power—that is, who speaks for Eurasians, and who is speaking when a public voice purports to speak for Eurasians—which only became more openly contested deeper into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and right up to India's Independence in 1947.

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<sup>1</sup> Uther Charlton-Stevens, *Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in south Asia: Race, Boundary Making and Communal Nationalism*, (London: Routledge, 2018) 19, 48-55; for Calcutta in particular also see Christopher Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India 1773-1833*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996), chapter 8.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the impact of the trial on the British imperial project in India see, Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Belknap, 2006).

### THE ANTHEM: FORM, RHETORIC & SENTIMENT

As an historical artifact, this text gains special qualities because of its form. Because it is in verse, one can imagine it being recited or sung univocally by all Eurasians. Indeed, this is what anthems are meant to do: to unite the people [of the 'nation'] in one voice, naming universal and unity-making beliefs, loyalties, missions and characteristics they hold in common. The poem opens up an imaginative space for the reader to appropriate the sentiments, the verse and/or the tune—that is, to find a harmonic resonance with the circumstances of his or her own life.

It is unclear whether *The Eurasian Anthem* was ever put to a tune and sung by school children, in orphanages, or at meetings of Eurasians. However, being named an 'anthem' evokes the contemporary hymnody of the Church of England and congregational singing. Among church-going Anglican readers of the *Oriental Herald*, whether Eurasians in India, members of Parliament in London, or colonial officials in other colonies, the association of *The Eurasian Anthem* with hymns would not be missed. Indeed readers may have been reminded of the numerous popular hymns composed by the prolific Bishop Reginald Heber, Bishop of India. Heber's hymns captured the civilizing mission of British colonialism in the mode of Christian duty in verse similar to *The Eurasian Anthem*.

Heber lined up with the evangelical turn in British politics, which saw Christianity as a morally reforming force, first of East India Company conduct and second of Indian society in general. The evangelicals were behind opening up East India Company territories to missionaries for the first time in 1813, and a general Anglicizing trend of colonial policy, exemplified by Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) and the English Education Act of the same year. Heber was at the center of this ideological trend, which blended Protestant evangelicalism, English culture and colonialism, and regarded it as a powerful moral force for good. Thus the *Eurasian Anthem* activated many sympathetic registers among its early 19<sup>th</sup> century readers throughout the British world, while simultaneously focusing attention on the injustice suffered by the mixed race in India.

### *Rhetoric and Sentiment*

We have already established that *The Eurasian Anthem* in its historical context is a political and religious text that holds the potential for wide resonances throughout the British world. Politically, it speaks of rights, liberty, unity, power and, perhaps chiefly, laws. Through words like “blessing,” “grace,” “great commission,” “fate,” “heaven,” it evokes the notion that Divine providence underwrites the colonial project. Finally it projects a collective identity for Eurasians. We turn to the text itself to unpack these elements further, in order to ascertain what voices and interests are audible or absent.

The poem opens with the emergence of Britain as a political entity, “When Britain, from the azure sea / First rose the Land of Liberty.” Britain is uniquely *the* land of liberty. As it is born, it is also given a divine mission, the “great commission”. This line directly evokes the Christian gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16 to 20, where the resurrected Jesus Christ, just before ascending into heaven, instructs his apostles to go out to the world and share the faith and baptize the converted.<sup>3</sup> The author of *The Eurasian Anthem* puts Britain’s great commission like this: “Go forth to India’s distant strand, / Subdue and civilize the land, / And better her condition.” Britain’s mission from Christ is to bring civilization and docility to India. He could hardly evoke a higher or more pure authority on which to base Britain’s colonial project. No doubt this notion of the civilizing mission aligns with that of evangelicals and Liberals in Parliament – the very sort Eurasians would appeal to in the Petition carried by J. Ricketts in 1830 – not the greedy and corrupt leadership of the East India Company in the prior generation, nor Tories in Parliament.

The poem asserts that it is chiefly by means of British Law that Britain is meant to “civilize and subdue” and “better” India’s condition: “Grant her thy Laws, dispense them fair, / And bless the sable nation”. In short, British law is made analogous to the Gospel, for it is seen to be divinely inspired. Contrary to the prevailing system, which

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<sup>3</sup> **16** Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (NIV translation)

applied different codes of law (and courts, judges and juries) based on whether the persons concerned were English or Hindu or Muslim, and living in the jurisdictions of the Presidencies or not, the author of this poem advocates that the same law would apply to everyone, starting first with Eurasians: “To all and each extend thy grace, / But chiefly to an unborn race, / That shall be called Eurasian.” Implicit here is a criticism of the East India Company for the ambiguous legal position Eurasians suffered in its territories, when it came to the status and nature of marriages, the religious codes undergirding the law they would be held to, whether or not they could purchase property, the education they could obtain, or for whom they could work. If Britain’s divine commission was to bless India by its laws, should Eurasians, themselves Britain’s patrimony in India, not be obvious recipients of these blessings? In the eyes of the author it is a matter of birthright and justice: “For recollecting whence they [Eurasians] came, / They shall demand their due!”

Having first established a religious foundation for British colonialism, and then lifted up British Law as the principal gift to bestow upon India, the author proceeds to make several moves that place Eurasians in a central role in that project. He characterizes Eurasians as the loyal British subject *par excellence*, because they are “her flesh and bone” and thus linked by filial ties, though these ties were not reflected by their deprivation of rights under the law. With “more than filial ties, / The bulwark of her power shall raise / Against a hostile nation,” the author here makes reference to the historic importance of Eurasian—indeed, their paternal roots—in the military service of the company from which they had all but been excluded for more than thirty years, despite hostilities with the Afghans, Marathas and Tipu Sultan over this period.

The author goes on to characterize Eurasians as fitting and essential unifiers of British and Indian interests, for even their bodies testified to the unity of both peoples: “Allied to both the black and white, / They shall both interests unite, / And form the essential props / Of all thy future ample sway”. The idea that Eurasians could mediate between British and Indians or act as cultural brokers because they in some way belonged to both groups, is an argument that further supports their fair treatment on the basis of their usefulness to British rule.

## WHO SPEAKS?

We have established that *The Eurasian Anthem* is highly political in nature. It staked a position in the discourse on the nature of British values and on the underlying purpose and principles of colonialism. In so doing the *Anthem* also put forward a clear representation of who Eurasians are and how they wish to relate to the British state in India. Through the *Oriental Herald*, these views circulated in the metropole and throughout the empire. Given the strong claims made in the *Anthem* and its wide circulation, it is all the more important that we go deeper with our central question: whose voice(s) is speaking? Who dared to speak for all Eurasians, and on what authority? There are a host of possibilities, which may not get us to a certain answer but will at least reveal power dynamics which affected Eurasians deeply from this period forward throughout their history in British India—by voicing claims of Eurasian identity and political position, by silencing the voices of dissent, or rendering invisible quarters or classes of the community.

First let us remind ourselves of the purported authorship of the *Anthem*: an unnamed Eurasian young man, blind since the age of ten. This identity suggests a number of possible interpretations. Any young poet may be lauded for his/her skill, but as one who has mastered literary arts despite the handicap of blindness is ever more extraordinary. One may associate such a figure with the illustrious blind poets, prophets and patriarchs of Greek, English or Hebrew tradition, such as Virgil, Tiresias, Milton or Isaac. In this case the author would be situated in the company of great men of old.

Another interpretation is that this young man may have been, like so many other Eurasian youth in Madras, the orphaned child of a soldier of the East India Company who died from war or disease. It is reasonable to imagine that the boy would have been raised in the strict and spartan atmosphere of a military orphan school supported by the popular subscription of soldiers and officers, or under the watchful care of moralizing missionaries (after 1813, when regulation first permitted them in EIC territory) in schools supported by the beneficence of charitable sponsors in India and England. Madras was by no means exceptional, for in the Calcutta Presidency during this period, fortunate and well-educated Eurasians also spearheaded initiatives that

catered to promising Eurasian children, with academic education.<sup>4</sup> If the author was of this profile he would be a gleaming success story of a Eurasian subaltern.

In either case, the views expressed in the *Anthem* would align the author with the politics of liberals and evangelicals in Parliament, missionaries in India and their sponsors at home, and the elite and well-educated Eurasians who were behind the petitions to Parliament. What a clever young man, this author would have appeared to be! Especially if he came to such wisdom from the precarity of a childhood without the full health of sight, support of family, or the advantages of class and means.

But could the author, rather than a subaltern figure, be the blind son of a Eurasian elite? Could he be the son of one of the organizers of the Eurasian Petition in Madras? This is possible, but improbable. Eurasian leaders were prominent men, in private business, or in administrative services for the Company. As they were not fearful to take on this public role, give speeches, and put their names to the Petition, why would they have insisted upon the anonymity of their son's authorship of a work that recommended his genius and reflected well upon his parents?

The anonymity of the author, coupled with the description given of him, suggest more than his subaltern status among Eurasians in colonial society. First, it creates more interpretive room for the words and sentiments of the *Anthem* to be appropriated by any and all Eurasian as their own, which is a key function of the form of an 'anthem'. Second, it widens the possibility that the blind Eurasian young man is a fictitious author contrived by elites—be they Eurasian leaders, anti-EIC liberals, evangelicals or missionaries—to assert one voice for all Eurasians that is opposed to EIC policies and which appears to emanate even from the humble classes and not only elite. Creating such an appearance was important, because the grievances expressed in the *Anthem* and Eurasian petitions to Parliament were largely the concerns of a privileged class, such as owning property outside the Presidency towns, traveling to England for education or becoming Covenanted Officers in the Company's service. Due to persistent poverty most Eurasians could not have aspired to these things even prior

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<sup>4</sup> James Kyd, "Thoughts, How to Better the Condition of Indo-Britons; by a Practical Reformer," from the *Friend of India* V (1821): 33, republished in the *Calcutta Journal of Politics and General Literature*, 3:123 (1822:May) p. 313.

to the restrictions being enacted against them. Perhaps if a subaltern Eurasian voice expressed a perspective resonant with Eurasian elites, they would be taken more seriously by lawmakers in London as an oppressed class who awaited the execution of British justice on their behalf.

Whether the blind Eurasian young man is a contrived author, there is no doubt that the image his description and sentiments project constitute a counter-archetype of the Eurasian, for it contests those in popular circulation in which Eurasians were portrayed as a rising menace. According to Hawes, such disdainful views among the British towards Eurasians only increased through the first decades of the nineteenth century, and as European women arrived in larger numbers in India.<sup>5</sup>

“The Eurasian Anthem” counters the negative archetype of divided loyalties, indolence, and revolutionary potential, by replacing it with one of Imperial loyalty and Christian conviction, political utility and the potential of being a boon to the military and moral might of the growing colonial territory. While the actual voice of the author is mute or ambiguous, his imagined voice is important to the efficacy of this counter-archetype. The reader imagines the author to be doubly disadvantaged as both Eurasian and blind, but bright and ambitious, a Eurasian success story and a testament to the redemption and progress possible through extant and burgeoning Eurasian institutions and initiatives. The counter-archetypical Eurasian of the *Anthem* deserves recognition and congratulations, an earned place at the table alongside colonial white society. The inclusion of just enough, but not too much—a combination of voicing and silencing—of the author’s identity, is essential to the claim of the text as “The Eurasian Anthem,” and not just the opinion of a marginal, if bright, Eurasian.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that the purported author’s identity is probably meant to be read as subaltern, and more likely than not is a fictitious, contrived figure, yet we cannot know with certainty. It is clear, however, that the institutional, structural and intellectual conditions of the *Anthem’s* emergence on the public stage is completely conditioned by elites, even if the author was a subaltern Eurasian. By the time this was published

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<sup>5</sup> Hawes, 76-80.

in 1827, the elite Eurasians of Calcutta – James Kyd (founder of Kiddepore Docks), John William Ricketts (Board of Customs), Henry Derozio (poet and teacher at the Hindu College), among others – had organized Eurasians with education and means to petition authorities to lift the ban on people of their race as arms-bearing soldiers or officers in the Company Army, as covenanted officials of the EIC, from pursuing education in England, and from legal protections of person and property under British law. Eurasians in Madras were already launching their own petition.

*The Eurasian Anthem* create the impression of ethnic unity among Eurasians, and that they constituted a distinct community. In reality class differences probably overshadowed the kinship they shared by virtue of their mixed racial origins. In the end, the elite pen of “A Subscriber”, or the editorial discretion of the *Oriental Herald*, at best controlled or at worse coopted the voice of a Eurasian subaltern to rally Eurasians into “a reluctant community”<sup>6</sup> behind a set of interests, convictions and loyalties whose advantages would accrue mainly to elites.

The fiction of a univocal voice of Eurasians would continue, with elites speaking for the whole to Company and Crown. In *The Eurasian Anthem* we have a patriotic poem in the mouth of a model subaltern, one who has clearly surmounted difficulties to show great promise as an obedient son of Britain. He is proof that Eurasians are worthy of what they claim as their birthright: equality to their British fathers, and a share in the imperial project. These verses constitute a voice from below that affirmed the project being pursued by elites above, in the form of the three parliamentary petitions of 1827, 1829 and 1830 from the three Presidencies.

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow the concept from Christopher Hawes, who argues in chapter 2 of *Poor Relations* that Eurasians came to ethnic cohesion mainly through the proscriptive rulings of the EIC, whereas class differences had previously overshadowed any racial solidarity.

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