



BOOK REVIEW:

*THE ANGLO-INDIANS: A PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY*

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O'Brien, Barry (2022). *The Anglo-Indians: A Portrait of a Community*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company. 538 pages.

Barry O'Brien's door-stopper of a book, a rollicking paean to Anglo-Indians, is most timely in this moment in the history of India, when it is under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is very important to record, publicize and amplify the role and importance of minorities, when they are being squeezed into an existence predicated on sufferance. The book makes a significant contribution to this task, informing as it does, on the logical and legitimate *locus standi* of the Anglo-Indian community in India, and its evolution, both shaping and being shaped by the growth of India as a polity.

Encyclopedic in scope, the book is informed by rich insider knowledge of the community. Some of this was absorbed by Barry from his parents, who in turn garnered a lot from their parents and so on. But despite this prior knowledge, he tells us he was "shocked out of his socks" (p. xvii) by all that he learned while writing this book, a sensation that many a reader of the book will also experience.

*The Anglo-Indians* is entertaining and informative. You feel you're sitting with Barry and having a long 'chin wag', that is partly trip down memory lane, historical record, ethnography, curated recording of culture and objective defence of the community. It is an engrossing read and while hard to put down, at 538 pages needs more than a few sittings to complete. Those who've moderated an event in which Barry has been a speaker, will be familiar with how much he has to say, how well he says it, but could

he be a little less expansive!? Because of the homey tone he uses in the book, it seems fitting to refer to him in this piece, more informally as 'Barry'.

Writing by Anglo-Indians and on Anglo-Indians, and the emergence of the discipline of Anglo-Indian Studies (of which this journal is a vital part), has generated a lot of material. Those who've read existing works on Anglo-Indians -- academic, anecdotal, biographic -- will find much that is familiar in Barry's book, as he has drawn on all of it, older as well as more contemporary works (pp.521-525).<sup>1</sup> To mine it all is an impressive achievement, for which Barry credits the meticulous research by daughter Zasha and wife Denise.

The book details the "roller-coaster ride"<sup>2</sup> of Anglo-Indian fortunes, as the community has been deliberately used and abused by the powers that be. For the historical part Barry relies on primary and secondary sources and draws on his own experience and observations when it comes to bringing the story of the Anglo-Indians right up until this moment in time. He succeeds in his objective of writing, "a book that would focus on how the community had fitted into New India" (p. 521), and would be a corrective to "scattered clouds of misinformation" (p. 521). The book traces the manoeuvring within political spaces the community inhabited, from the earliest, right up until the debacle visited upon Anglo-Indians in 2019 with the removal of representation in legislatures (Andrews, Charlton-Stevens, Chew, 2019; Datta-Ray, 2020). It documents the efforts of pioneers and leaders from the early nineteenth century right up until the present time, the more well-known as well as the lesser known. It brings up-to-date the historical chronicling of minority politics dealt with so well in Uther Charlton-Stevens' historical study (2018).

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<sup>1</sup> The Derozio Anglo-Indian Collection, housed in Central Library, Calcutta University is a valuable and growing repository of much of this material. The book notes that debt owed to Blair William in this regard. Blair, with foresight donated his personal collection for this purpose. However, we also need to recognize Prof. Selwyn Jussy of the Linguistics Department of Calcutta University for working for this with the then Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Suranjan Das and the university's librarian Dr. Soumitra Sarkar. Dolores Chew was the person who connected Blair with Selwyn. And Prof. Mritunjoy Mohanty of IIM Calcutta also played a role in ensuring the shipped materials (from the US) would reach the library.

<sup>2</sup> This is a term Barry himself uses, though even if he didn't, most readers would be inclined to that adjective after learning of the history of the Anglo-Indian community for the first time, or being reminded of it, if they already knew it.

The expansiveness of the book is testament to Barry's admiration for David Wallechinsky, "the world's first pop historian" (p.xi). Its chronological ordering, pen sketches, timelines and use of Anglo-Indianisms, make it a treasure trove of information and trivia; encyclopedia, dictionary, a kind of Hobson-Jobson, rolled into one. Almost every well-known Anglo-Indian personality – sportsman, writer, educator, politician, entertainer, religious figure, medical professional, member of the armed forces, philanthropist, visionary – gets at least one mention in the book, as do not-so-well-known ones, such as yours truly, commended for my "lethal 'tongue-lashing'" of the film *Cotton Mary* (p. 390). Over the years I've attempted to initiate an Anglo-Indian glossary, with input from community members, also a book of Anglo-Indian Christmases. They didn't materialize. But *The Anglo-Indians* has reassured me that much of this is now on record.

The book was deeply personal for me. There was a lot I was very familiar with, growing up in Calcutta in the '50s, '60s and '70s. For while Anglo-Indian life and history in many parts of India, (pre- and post-Partition), are well-covered in the book, Calcutta/Kolkata<sup>3</sup> features prominently, partly because of the size of the community, but also because it is Barry's city. *The Anglo-Indians* was nostalgia, memory and delight rolled into one - Anglo-Indian wedding traditions, Christmas and the New Market, shopping in Rehman's ('Ramin's'). Boy's Town, Fr. Alan DeLastic, Fr. Conquo are places and persons who are very much part of my memories of childhood and adolescence. My mother, a teacher, was active in teachers' associations, and some of the educators named in the book, were her friends and associates. The book also documents many of the Anglo-Indian communities in other parts of India, including 'Thangashery/Tangasseri', where I visited with relatives during school holidays.

A constant thread in the book is the community's political struggles over the centuries right up until today, which demonstrates grit and perseverance in the face of great odds. While there were disagreements, and factionalism – that bane of collective action is ubiquitous--one nonetheless feels admiration for the dedication, commitment and tireless striving to advance and advocate for minority rights for a community that

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<sup>3</sup> Like Barry does in the book with regard to the spelling of place names that have changed, I'm using the spelling of 'Calcutta' both in the original English spelling of the place, which was used when I lived there, and the relatively more recent one, 'Kolkata', depending on the time context.

has been seen as foreign, traitorous, anti-national and increasingly in today's context of Hindu ethno-nationalism, as Christian. The book effectively shows how the community has manoeuvred to elicit concessions and affirmative action policies and been able to adapt and survive through the vagaries of time and different political dispensations.

While admiring the efforts to carve a space for the community in tough terrain, we cannot but ignore some critical questions, for example about Anglo-Indian 'colonization' movements. There didn't seem to be any consideration at that time or in Barry's recounting today, about the displacement of populations who might already have been inhabiting those spaces in the Andaman Islands, and what became McCluskieganj and Whitefield. Whether they were official allotments, 'gifts' or 'purchases', the introduction of populations not native to the area makes us mindful of the Restorationist and Zionist slogan, "Land without people for a people without a land". This is the case even if we are mindful of historical relativism and we recognize that these efforts were driven by the need for survival of a community that didn't have the linguistic and ethnic rootedness of most other groups/communities in India. There is also an element of irony, in that a community born of the colonial encounter and being ill-used by that colonizer, would seek to establish 'colonizing' movements of their own. Perhaps, colonialism was so normative that the community didn't see anything paradoxical in this. However, one can't but note the hegemonic elision when Barry muses today, "our own...Sikkim", a "little state of our own", implicit in which is his acceptance of the problematic annexation of Sikkim into India (p. xvi).

On the other hand, Barry is to be congratulated for tackling head-on, the elephant in the room – who is an Anglo-Indian? He challenges the patriarchal assumption in "European in the male line", in the Indian Constitution, Article 366(2). But what I most appreciate, and aligns with my understanding, is his point that the Constitutional definition "has everything to do with blood, race, and one's father's lineage, and nothing to do with culture, language, and way of life" (p.xxvi). An Anglo-Indian living in Kolkata may be able to speak Bengali and one living in Kerala can speak Malayalam but it's not this difference that defines them; rather it's things like shared cultural practices, foods and idiomatic English usage (even if they may be inflected with some localisms). And he quotes Anglo-Indian literary icon Allan Sealy who thinks similarly:

...this obsession with race...we have been defined over and over again as a community of mixed-race. I would like to think that we could exchange this notion of race for a simple one – culture. ... It is something that you don't have to explain. (p. xxvii)

Another thorny issue that Barry, perhaps inadvertently touches on, is the obsession with the licit/illicit, legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy regarding the origins of the community. Frank Anthony recognized as community leader for decades, including through the difficult days in pre- and post-independence India, was very apprehensive about this.

There is a vague and perhaps widespread belief that the Anglo-Indian community, like some other mixed communities perhaps, was the result of a haphazard process of miscegenation between outcaste Englishmen and outcaste Indian women. There is also perhaps the cynical insinuation that the origin of the community is largely shrouded in the blankets of incontinence. In fact, nothing is further from the truth. The community has developed along quite formal and legitimate lines. (p. 17)

Anthony was incensed with the aspersions thrown at the community, most likely even as he reveals his own moralistic bias, as he saw this contributing to marginalisation. However, by deliberately disregarding the evidence of informal and extra-legal alliances, he unwittingly affirms the stereotypes that he seeks to quash. Repeating the vile characterizations — 'miscegenation', 'outcaste', 'incontinence' – it would seem he supports their usage (as long as it's not to describe Anglo-Indians) and so perpetuates very problematic racial, gender and casteist hierarchies and patriarchal stances with respect to female virtue and chastity.<sup>4</sup>

In the sections about Anglo-Indian contributions to India's defence, India's sports reputation and Indian education, Barry demonstrates how though numerically a very small community, Anglo-Indians have always punched above their weight. At a time when the loyalty of minority communities in India is being questioned and their Indianness is being excoriated, this detailed history needs to be amplified. Anglo-Indians have demonstrated time and again their loyalty and patriotism. While it's unfortunate and pitiable that minorities feel compelled to prove their credentials and

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<sup>4</sup> I explore some of this in the following. "The Search for Kathleen McNally and Other Chimerical Women: colonial and post-colonial gender representations of Eurasians," in Brinda Bose (2002), ed. *Translating Desire: the politics of gender and culture in India*. New Delhi. "Will the Real Anglo-Indian Woman Please Stand Up!" in Margaret Deefholts and Susan Deefholts (2010), eds. *Women of Anglo-India*. New Jersey.

demonstrate their 'worthiness' for rights and entitlements, in the times we live in, it contributes to a timely discussion of 'who is an Indian'.

In this connection, as he chronicles the history of the community, Barry traces the history of migration, the first wave, often those who believed they were 'going home', but then subsequent waves when Anglo-Indians, like other Indians, went abroad simply to improve the prospects for themselves and their families. Nowadays, like many Indians from the middle-classes and elites, where most families have one or more relative residing abroad, Anglo-Indians are no different. The notion that Anglo-Indians leave because they don't feel 'Indian' is successfully demolished in the book. Moreover, Barry goes on to record how many Anglo-Indians who live in India are successful, in careers and areas of employment or self-employment which enable them to enjoy a comfortable standard of living; also the percentage of Anglo-Indians pursuing post-secondary and post-graduate education has increased. At the same time, the book recognizes that many Anglo-Indians still live in very straitened circumstances and it also acknowledges the efforts of many community members in India and the diaspora, towards ameliorating the lives of their less-fortunate community members and giving the youth hope and promise for a better future, such as CAISS (Calcutta Anglo-Indian Service Society).

Apart from those who left to go 'home', in the first wave of departures, there were Anglo-Indians who left soon after Independence because they felt the community would not fare well in a post-colonial state, having often been identified with the colonizer through association, service, or simply culture. And part of the sad, sorry history of Anglo-Indians is the loyalty shown to the colonizers, despite being used and abused by them. One of those who saw no future in independent India was Stanley Prater. He perceived the community would suffer in a post-colonial state not just because of questions about loyalty, but because of the political forces in existence. Anthony lamented the departure of Prater, who had been the community's representative in the Bombay Legislative Council for seventeen years and who Anthony regarded as his 'principal lieutenant in the Constituent Assembly'. Writing about this, Anthony said: "He persuaded himself that there were mounting signs of

Hindu revivalism and implacable resistance to the provisional safeguards for minorities.” Living in the times we do, Prater’s assessment seems most prescient.

In the chapter ‘Another ‘Betrayal’ – This Time by the Government of India’<sup>5</sup> (2019-2020), Barry describes how a decision, uninformed by facts on the ground was pushed through and deprived Anglo-Indians of reservations.<sup>6</sup> Articles written into the Constitution of India provided for Anglo-Indian representation by government nomination (reservations) for up to two seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People in parliament), and for state governors to nominate an Anglo-Indian to a State Assembly. Frank Anthony noted how while the British had denied Anglo-Indian representation in the Constituent Assembly, “Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel agreed to give us three seats” (p. 96). Article 331 of the Constitution declared that reservations would cease to exist after 10 years. However, they got extended six times right up until January 2020. Over the years there had been political parties who supported the continuance of reservations and those who did not.

In December 2019 the “Indian government suddenly, arbitrarily, and insidiously wiped away the provision for the nomination of Anglo-Indian representatives to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies” (p. 157). The bill that was presented in parliament clubbed together *continuation* of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and *discontinuation* of reservations for Anglo-Indians. It was a devious strategy because it meant voting against the bill would be seen as voting against SCs and STs. Other elements of political sleight of hand were also deployed. Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad asserted that per the data in the 2011 Census of India (the last available one), there were only 296 Anglo-Indians in India!

A brief background is needed to understand this sleight of hand. Over the years the decennial Census questionnaire reduced the number of identifier categories. The 1961 Census asked for ‘nationality’ and ‘religion’. And it did away with ‘caste or community’, but kept ‘SC/ST’. The 1971 census removed ‘nationality’, and only had ‘religion’ and ‘SC/ST’. The removal of ‘community’ from the 1961 census questionnaire

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<sup>5</sup> This is a nod to Frank Anthony’s *Britain’s Betrayal in India*.

<sup>6</sup> Also see Viswajeet Deshmukh and Ketayun Mistry (2022).

met with approval by Frank Anthony who believed that it would ensure that *Feringhees* in Kerala, who he saw as Malayalam-speaking Indian Christians trying to pass as Anglo-Indians, would not be able to do so. This speaks to the importance of identifying who is an Anglo-Indian, written about above. However, by acquiescing, Anthony shot the community in the foot. Realizing how crucial it was for the community to get counted as 'Anglo-Indian', there were attempts in later years by Anglo-Indian Lok Sabha representative MP Beatrix D'Souza and Rajya Sabha MP Derek O'Brien (who is Anglo-Indian but sits in parliament as a party nominee of the Trinamool Congress) to ensure that Anglo-Indians could specify their community on the census form. Sadly, their efforts came to nought.

It was pointed out that if the BJP government believed the size of the community was so small, why had they continued to appoint community representatives in parliament and in state assemblies where their party formed the government, including in Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh, where according to their statistics there were zero Anglo-Indians! The bill passed even though twenty-seven parliamentarians, representing seventeen political parties were in favour of the continuance of Anglo-Indian representation (p. 167). Also, the timing of the vote was such that it happened on the last day of legislation of the year. Setting aside internal differences the community rallied, recalling earlier times when crises brought the community together as former MP Beatrix D'Souza recalled. "In our long history, the community has often got together to protect its interests and identity, under leaders like J.W. Ricketts and Henry Gidney, especially during its uncertain relationship with the British" (p.167). A meeting was held post facto where it was decided to "engage the government in dialogue while reaching out to the entire political fraternity represented in parliament, well-wishers, and the media" (p. 167).

Returning to the troubling number of 296, it's assumed that those 296 individuals who identified themselves as 'Anglo-Indian' in the 2011 Census possibly confused their religion or sect within the Christian faith (p. 161). Meanwhile all the other Anglo-Indians, approximately 3.5 lakhs (p. 168) of them stuck with the categories on offer, which had no scope for 'community' identity. An observer might lean towards giving the government the benefit of doubt and say they were genuinely mistaken. However,



when representatives of the community reached out to them, via letters and in person, they didn't change anything. This makes one think that (1) they didn't care and (2) it plays into something more sinister, linked to the ethnonationalist agenda of the current dispensations. If you deny a community exists, then property, especially the many educational institutions that are under its purview no longer get special status. And by dissolving Anglo-Indian educational institutions the government does away with a large number of such spaces that offer a secular, well-rounded education that is affordable (either because fees are lower, but also because of the charitable and philanthropic work and scholarships on offer). There is a lot in the book (in particular see Ch. 13) about Anglo-Indian educational institutions and the generations of students of all communities and religions who've benefitted, many of them prominent in politics, business, academia and many other fields. They acknowledge the great debt they and the nation owe to generations of very dedicated educators whose sole objective was to provide the best education possible to their students; that they saw these students as building a better India, a democratic and secular India. It is unfortunate that some of these individuals, like Swapan Dasgupta have gone over to the dark side and become abject apologists for the current dispensation. Giving the government a tongue-lashing about the ending of nominated representation of Anglo-Indians, Sunanda Datta-Ray wrote, "Abolishing Anglo-Indian legislators is probably the first step, the true long-term target being the hugely popular Anglo-Indian schools on which the authorities dare not mount a frontal attack" (Datta-Ray, 2020). And what happens then? Majoritarianism spells disaster for millions of children and their families unable to pay the exorbitant fees of private, for profit institutions, leaving the field open for the ideologically-driven education establishments set up by Hindu ethnonationalist organizations.

Living as I do in Quebec where we have a nationalist government in power that uses 'identity' based on language and dress (clothing) as markers of belonging, we are also seeing deployment of legislation to curtail minority rights. Individuals wearing visible religious symbols – hijabs, kippas, turbans — are barred from holding public office, including teaching in publicly-funded schools. This legislation has been appealed and is making its way up the legal system and will most likely reach the Supreme Court of Canada, as it violates basic freedoms that are guaranteed in law. And English-

language colleges have just been told their enrolments must be capped in favour of Anglophone students, and their students must take more program courses in French, ostensibly to (1) make it harder for Francophone students wishing to improve their English as they live in a globalized world, to get admission to these colleges, and (2) to make it more difficult for Anglophone students to complete their college diplomas. In fact, as with India<sup>7</sup>, there are many who feel the current ultra-nationalist government in Quebec would like to do away with English education completely in the province. However, with legal, historical minority claims, this is not easy to do in one fell swoop — and so a slow bleed, death by a thousand cuts. In both India and Quebec, attacking vulnerable populations, minorities, that are already marginalized does not augur well for the majority. Minorities are the canaries in the mine shaft and majorities need to realize majoritarian tyranny is disastrous for them too.

Barry doesn't shy away from other points in national history. During the Emergency of 1975-1977, Frank Anthony walked a tight line. Generally supportive of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi he added "a big 'but'" (p. 141). One can see him hedging his bets. Loyalty to a party and family who had accorded political recognition for Anglo-Indians, but alert to the threat to democracy. In throwing his support behind Indira Gandhi, however, he eventually lost out. After her defeat and that of party, the Congress in 1977, Anthony did not get renominated to parliament by the next Prime Minister, Morarji Desai.

*The Anglo-Indians* is a book that must be read. However, I found the haphazard referencing annoying and distracting. While I appreciate that the book wasn't written for academic purposes, it would have been great to have all sources listed in a bibliography. At times a piece in an anthology is referenced, while another piece from the same anthology that is also referred to in the main text, isn't. Often the flow could have been helped by placing some interesting, yet slightly off-topic point in a footnote, rather than keeping it in the main text. A comprehensive Index would have also been very useful. Given the size of the book it was easy to lose track of which page something or someone had first appeared. An incomplete index meant it wasn't always possible to go back and remind oneself of some details or context.

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<sup>7</sup> This is with reference to the point about setting sights on Anglo-Indian educational institutions.

That said, *bon appétit!*

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