



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS:
A STATEMENT BY AN INDIAN ANGLO-INDIAN

Denis La Fontaine

I have a theory that the general character of Anglo-Indians in Independent India has changed from generation to generation. Certainly my cultural socialization, a product of the British system of education in India is not as evolved as that of my children and is even less so in relation to my grand children. It seems probable to me that this is a common thread among all the Anglo-Indian families for whom India is the only home they recognize, and who are therefore, here in India with their children and grandchildren.

This generational difference in cultural outlook is, I think, negligible between me and my parent's generation and their parent's generation. This is because there was no real difference in the inter-generational up-bringing of Anglo-Indians in pre-independent India. We were all the product of what were then called (still are, in fact) Anglo-Indian schools. The curriculum in these schools were designed by some unknown body of Englishmen (who probably knew little, if anything, about India) and the school-leaving standard, known as the Senior Cambridge, was massively English. English language and English literature were primary subjects. Every school and there were scores of them all over India, taught "The History of the British Empire" with a cursory flitting over the history of India, our very ancient country. I recall the Indian History textbook as being a very thin volume and that disappeared from our desks after doing the Junior Cambridge exam. To get that school-leaving certificate, we were required to be pretty well-informed about the history of the British Empire with all its reported heroisms but were guided into almost total ignorance of the history of the country we were supposed to belong to.

The very competent teaching staff in all these schools, were almost all missionary and of foreign origin, Jesuit priests, Irish Patrician, Irish Christian brothers and several orders of nuns in the convents. English was the only spoken language (even the kitchen staff and table waiters used it) and so it was essentially our mother tongue – no other language was ever used by all generations in each household in pre- independent India.

This being the background, it can be said that I am partially representative of the last generation of Anglo Indians whose education occurred in British India. I think our primary characteristic (indeed, I think the way we perceived ourselves) was that we were misfits. Lack of local language skill was probably the foremost factor causing this perception.

Lack of Indian language skills was of no consequence through the carefree days of school but I became distinctly uncomfortable about it in later days when, despite strong inclinations, I had to carefully avoid any interplay with the mass of interesting, ordinary Indians all around me because I simply could not adequately communicate. My mastery of Hindi grammar and scope of vocabulary was dreadfully abysmal. The awareness of being a misfit was very strong and I believe it troubles most of my fellow Anglo-Indians and (even though this problem was never discussed) I believe it was the sense of being misfits that led to large numbers of them relocating to English-speaking environments.

At this point, still at a fairly tender age, I found my way into the Indian Air Force and embarked on the fascinating business of learning to fly an aeroplane as a weapon of war. The new life unfolded with its all-absorbing attractiveness and that too in a set up where my misfit characteristics were unimportant. The working language was English, all the compulsory reading was in English and all the off-duty shenanigans with my fellow cadets was also in English. Clearly, my fate was in my own hands. There were no externally imposed limitations on my capability to achieve and thus my discomforts diminished, I think. What I do know for sure was that my sense of belonging soared.

I made some interesting discoveries during the period of training. Almost all my

buddies were pure Indian: I was no longer surrounded only by the mixed-race variety like me. Almost all of them had been to Anglo-Indian schools and our backgrounds were very similar. There were some differences. Most of them, while quite as fluent in English as I was, were also masters of their mother tongue and if that happened to be Tamil or Telegu or Malayalam or Punjabi or Bengali or whatever, their smattering of Hindi (the so-called National language), was probably marginally better than mine. But there were a few whose mother tongue was essentially English, the only language spoken in their purely Indian homes (Hindu or Muslim) and they were quite as shaky as I was in the use of any Indian language. I wasn't such a misfit after all and my love affair with the Air Force and its people blossomed. My whole life became anchored to being part of this country's Air Force and part of this country itself.

Shortly after we were commissioned, in the early 1950s, the exodus of Anglo-Indians started off and went on for quite a while. It was a process that I was quite unable to identify with largely, I think, because of my father's attitudes which I seem to have absorbed, lock, stock and barrel. In the last two years of WWII, he came back to India from postings abroad and was moved as Medical Officer to a British-officered Indian regiment in Bombay and later to the Embarkation Head Quarters also in Bombay. I spent about a great number of long winter holidays from school in the hills with him after a gap of many years and got to learn a little about the working of the world.

He was particular about me meeting what he called a "rare breed" of British Army officer. These were mostly graduates or undergraduates who had been inserted into Army uniforms only because of the war. They were all quite exercised about British exploitation of and unfairness to this country. I remember discussions about protection of the Lancashire cotton mills by blockage of machine weaving in India and several on the discouragement of Indian industry. Some of them were determined to take up matters with their MPs after demobilization, they were so put out about it. I was an attentive listener, never a participant and always looked forward to my father's later explanations.

He was always pleased that I paid attention to people with a "larger, unrestricted"

outlook and told me I would never hear such informed opinion from Empire-building, regular British army officers, the only kind we ever met before the war started. Of course there were several of that kind, that I also met during these holidays and they were invariably, determinedly disparaging in their comments on this country, its incompetent people and their insupportable habits and my father would identify, the “macho-snideness” so displayed usually when Indian officers were present.

Another thing contributed to my enlightenment. Before the war he had briefly been posted to a place called Wana in the troubled tribal belt of the North West Frontier Province. He had brought back “official” pictures to show me (only me) of beheaded tribesmen who had been “troublesome”. Their heads were stuck onto tall spikes that were mounted in bazaar areas to warn all concerned of the probable consequence of anyone’s “troublesomeness”. There were others with the tendon of their heels severed so that they could hobble along but certainly couldn’t run. I can’t remember if he described any legal process leading to these exhibitions but only remember his distaste for this remarkable British barbarity.

The end result was that I grew up in an Anglo-Indian household where the British and their record in India were viewed with some objectivity. During those long-gone years I encountered several Englishmen who struck me as being quite admirable but the general feeling remained that their country’s management of mine was not. Then 1947 rolled in and included the British government’s general roll-out. The positive, though vaguely defined feeling in my system was that this was, indeed, a very good thing. To follow them to their country was unthinkable.

There were quite a few other occurrences during those holidays that must have hardened my attitudes. I met up with the families of a couple of school mates and was somewhat shaken by their sisters. They too were on holiday and together with some of their girlfriends dropped remarks about how they couldn’t wait to get “home”. I remember one saying that the best view of India was of the Gateway of India from the back of a ship leaving Bombay Harbour. What I felt is best described as a distinct discomfort with such statements. I wasn’t clear enough in my head to classify it as the pretentious silliness that it actually was, but I was positively aware of not wanting

to be in that number.

Back to the Air Force: After the training period was over and we entered the sharp end of the business in op squadrons, my only life concern was to be good enough to be accepted and to stay where I was. Certainly the worry of being a misfit in the nation's structure disappeared. I passed the Service's compulsory Hindi exam in 1955 and was advised by a kindly examiner to read Hindi literature and smarten up my grammar and vocabulary. I'd had every intention of doing so but Air Force business required so much reading and study that that took first place. Hindi literature (to my everlasting regret) never figured significantly on my reading lists. My grammar and vocabulary are still very scruffy but it doesn't seem to matter much. I can quite easily interact with anyone in this language. It seems strange that the nature of my limitations placed me in the very good company of some excellent Indians.

I am now retired and no longer in the warm lap of this nation's Air Force, that nurtured me so impersonally but so attractively for the four decades of my productive life. I live in the boondocks of rural Andhra Pradesh, a Telugu speaking state. I am now learning that language (I can read and write it very slowly and speak it atrociously) and am content with my existence right smack in the middle of a nation that I struggled to serve faithfully and which has rewarded me with acceptance as a citizen of at least some value.

Lastly there is one thing I must comment about. I have heard some people visiting from abroad (Anglo-Indians among them) say that India is an impossible place to live in if you are a minority community on the grounds that they were outsiders and therefore anti-Hindu. The other huge, enormous mass of Indian citizenry are not of this mind, which of course renders the people who think thus as being more non-Indian outsiders than their victims.

I bumped into one such person (a clearly non-local man) in the local bank several years ago and he objected to my conversation with the cashier in English rather than Hindi. I could see that the cashier (a Telugu speaker) was not at all pleased. It is highly unlikely that this person, or any of the few like him would offer me violence but

even that is something that I could take in my stride. If my days are to end by being scoffed at by such people, I know very well that in the eyes of the nation, their Indianness will be considered questionable and mine probably enhanced.

What better comfort for someone who once feared being a misfit. I belong to a huge family of very pleasing people. JAI HIND.

Editor's Note: The author is the late Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Denis Anthony La Fontaine. These views are entirely his and have not been edited. The article forms a part of some essays he wrote during retirement and that may be of interest to Indians, particularly Anglo-Indians, who live here and anywhere else in the world who proudly profess their foundations from India, along with great loyalty to the Indian nation.