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CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES: THE ANGLO-INDIAN COMMUNITY IN POST- INDEPENDENCE DARJEELING

Brian Gomes, Shilpita Gine and Joyce Kempe

ABSTRACT

The Anglo-Indian community in Darjeeling reflects a distinctive process of assimilation, in which patterns of belonging and social participation have evolved through interaction with local communities within the historical context of colonial rule and postcolonial nationhood. Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling have been found to integrate elements of Nepali and Hindu traditions to conform to the local culture while they also maintain their faith in Christianity as well as other distinctively Anglo-Indian traits. With this as the backdrop, this research article traces changing identity and cultural assimilation of the Anglo-Indian community in Darjeeling. Based on ethnographic interviews and participant observation conducted between November 2022 and December 2024, this research analyses how Anglo-Indians have navigated their identity in the context of interfaith relationships, regional influences, and evolving sociopolitical dynamics. The study identifies decline among non-mainstream identities within Darjeeling. The paper recognizes the Anglo-Indian community in Darjeeling as unique, situating it in the wider context of the post-colonial shift towards the stronger assertion of regional and linguistic cultural dominance in India, as against both ethnic distinctiveness on the one hand or national uniformity on the other. Despite their decreasing number, Anglo-Indians still contribute to India's multicultural landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The Anglo-Indian community in Darjeeling occupies a distinctive yet decreasingly visible place within the social landscape of the hills. This small minority has been shaped by a colonial past, migration, and intermarriage, and today, they live in a region where the Nepali language predominates social interactions. In such contexts, the fundamental issues of culture, memory, and belonging play a crucial role in how members of these communities perceive their own identities. This article seeks to explore how Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling navigate their identities in contemporary society.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how Anglo-Indian heritage is perceived today, as well as how it is interpreted, constructed, and adapted by community members amidst varying social and cultural conditions. Contrary to the prevailing narrative of Anglo-Indian identity as a vanishing entity, this article highlights how it is continually reshaped through everyday life – manifested in language, culinary traditions, religious practices, intermarriage, and familial memories. Employing an ethnographic approach, the study draws on the experiences of multiple generations of Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling, illustrating how their identity is sustained, adapted, and transformed for modern contexts.

Generational differences further illuminate this transformation. Many elders in the community retain emotional and cultural ties to their colonial ancestry, fondly recalling community dances, festive gatherings, and a shared sense of distinctiveness. For them, colonial memory serves as a vital symbolic resource, even as they acknowledge social changes and increasing inclusivity in various aspects of life. In contrast, younger Anglo-Indians engage with this history in a more abstract and conceptual manner. For them, colonialism manifests as a cultural inheritance, rather than a lived experience. Their identities are predominantly shaped by socialization within Nepali-speaking peer groups, workplaces, and communities, leading to a prevailing sense of regional belonging in the absence of strong institutional separation.

Thus, generational change represents not only demographic shifts but also symbolic transformations in the cultural and social resources through which identity is constructed and understood. This paper aims to demonstrate how Anglo-Indians in

Darjeeling continue to position themselves within a multi-ethnic context characterized by migration, regional politics, and evolving social relationships. Their stories embody a new iteration of reconceptualization and reinterpretation, imbuing contemporary significance to Anglo-Indianness in the hills.

The presence of Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling is rooted in the expansion of the tea plantation economy during British rule (McCabe, 2014; Mondal, 2019). As the British began cultivating tea gardens in the region in the mid-19th century, planters, officials, and soldiers settled in the area (McCabe, 2014; Mondal, 2019). European male traders often formed partnerships and marriages with Indian women, leading to the emergence of the Anglo-Indian community (McCabe, 2014; Mondal, 2019). The tea industry not only altered the landscape but also created a social order in which Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and local inhabitants occupied distinct roles. Education played a pivotal role in this structure, with schools established in places like Kurseong and Kalimpong primarily catering to European and Anglo-Indian children, who often had limited experience with other languages. As noted in Biswas (2021) and reiterated in McCabe (2014) and Mondal (2019), these institutions provided English-language education and instilled British cultural values, preparing students for employment within the colonial system – whether in clerical roles, the railway, telegraph, or plantations. Simultaneously, this educational framework reflected racial hierarchies, positioning Anglo-Indians between Europeans and Indians – affording them certain privileges through language and education, yet never fully recognizing them as European.

Over time, this shared historical experience has shaped the community's sense of belonging and their place in society. However, this dynamic shifted dramatically following Indian independence in 1947. The end of British rule and the subsequent Indianization of public services led to the erosion of many jobs once held by Anglo-Indians (Blunt, 2005). As a result, a significant number emigrated to countries such as the UK, Australia, and Canada (Andrews, 2007). Those who remained in Darjeeling faced their position in a newly independent nation. Understanding this history is crucial, as it elucidates why Anglo-Indian identity in Darjeeling has been characterized by mobility, education, and a prolonged state of being socially “in-between”. The legacies of tea plantations, colonial education, and post-independence migration

continue to influence both community perceptions and the perspectives of others today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Anglo-Indians mostly have focused on the history of the formation of the community, their position within colonial society, their occupational role under British rule, and the migration that followed Independence (James, 2010, Andrews, 2007). While this scholarship is important because it explains how Anglo-Indian identity emerged historically and how the community came to occupy a distinct minority position in India, it is also important to acknowledge more recent contributions, which examine Anglo-Indian life and identity in contemporary India, including smaller towns and hill station contexts (Raj & Andrews, 2021; Andrews & Roy 2021). Although Darjeeling is not directly covered in these literatures, the discussion of Anglo-Indian communities in other hill stations provides an important comparative perspective for understanding regional Anglo-Indian experiences outside metropolitan centres.

Even with these important contributions, however, the existing body of work does not fully explain how Anglo-Indian identity is lived and negotiated today, particularly in smaller regional settings such as Darjeeling. Much of the earlier literature has focused on history, migration, education, political representation and generational changes (Andrews, 2020) but less attention has been given to everyday experiences of identity, belonging, intermarriage in specific local contexts. This study therefore builds on existing research while shifting the focus toward everyday life and identity in the hills, with particular attention to assimilation, belonging, intermarriage, and generational change.

Historical research shows clearly that Anglo-Indian identity was never fixed or ‘natural’, but developed through colonial encounters, administrative classification, and changing racial and social boundaries (James, 2010). Earlier mixed populations emerged through relationships between European men and Indian women in colonial settlements, but these groups did not initially share a single collective identity (Carton, 2000; Lawford, 1978; Weston, 1939). Instead, different labels such as *mestiço*, *metis*, and other locally used terms reflected fragmented identities connected to different European groups and colonial regions (Carton, 2000). Over time, terms like “Eurasian”

and “Anglo-Asian” came into use, often shaped by colonial racial hierarchies. The later adoption of the term “Anglo-Indian,” particularly after 1911, helped consolidate these mixed populations into a more clearly recognized community (Blunt et al., 2012; James, 2010).

This historical literature is important because it shows that Anglo-Indian identity has always been shaped by negotiation and adaptation rather than simply by ancestry. Legal recognition under the Government of India Act of 1935 and later in the Indian Constitution gave the community official minority status, but scholars have pointed out that legal definitions often emphasized paternal European descent and did not fully reflect lived realities of family, culture, and community life (Andrews, 2005). This gap between official definitions and lived identity remains relevant today, especially when examining how Anglo-Indians understand themselves in different regional contexts.

Another important theme in the literature concerns Anglo-Indians’ social and occupational position during colonial rule and after Independence. Studies have shown that Anglo-Indians often worked in railways, telegraphs, customs, clerical service, and education, supported by English education and Christian institutional networks (Andrews, 2005). This occupational concentration contributed to the development of a distinct community culture centred around schools, churches, music, food, and strong social networks (Andrews, 2005). After Independence in 1947, however, the community faced major challenges. The loss of colonial employment structures and uncertainty about social status led many Anglo-Indians to migrate abroad, while others remained in India and adapted to new social and economic conditions (Andrews, 2005). As a result, much of the literature on Anglo-Indians after Independence focuses on migration, dispersal, nostalgia, and community decline. While this existing research is valuable, it has mostly focused on large urban centres such as Calcutta (Andrews, 2005, 2007), Madras (Caplan, 1995), Bangalore (O'Connor, 2019), and railway colonies (Bear, 2001; Roy, 2012).

While scholarship on Anglo-Indians has historically focused on metropolitan centres, more recent work has begun to shift attention toward smaller towns and regional settings. For instance, Andrews and Roy, (2021) highlights the diversity of Anglo-Indian experiences across railway towns, hill stations, and port cities, demonstrating that the

community is far from homogeneous and is shaped by place-specific socio-cultural dynamics. The paper emphasizes how these studies incorporate ethnographic and historical approaches to understand questions of identity, memory, citizenship, and belonging beyond metropolitan narratives (Maji, 2021). However, despite this important intervention, regions such as Darjeeling remain underexplored in sociological terms. Although Darjeeling has been widely studied as a colonial hill station, tea plantation economy, and missionary education hub, existing research largely focuses on institutional histories – such as schools, churches, and colonial administrative structures – rather than the lived, contemporary experiences of Anglo-Indians in the region (Biswas, 2021; McCabe, 2014; Mondal, 2019). Thus, a significant gap persists in understanding the present-day socio-cultural realities, identity negotiations, and everyday lives of Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling.

This absence becomes even more noticeable when we look at the broader scholarship on Darjeeling. Much of the research on the region have focused on the Gorkhaland movement, Nepali identity, language politics, and regional autonomy movements (Mukhia, 2024; Gurung 2020). Whereas this scholarship is extremely important for understanding the political and ethnic landscape of the hills, it also means that smaller minority communities such as Anglo-Indians often remain invisible in academic discussions. The Anglo-Indians are usually described as part of Darjeeling's multicultural society, yet their own experiences of belonging, identity, and adaptation have not been explored in depth (Biswas, 2021; McCabe, 2014; Mondal, 2019). There is a significant gap in the literature, particularly in understanding how a small minority community negotiates identity in a region where political belongingness is strongly shaped by other ethnic identities. It is this gap that the present study fills. The study focuses on themes that have been discussed in Anglo-Indian studies more broadly but have not been examined in relation to Darjeeling sociologically in detail. These themes include assimilation, cultural continuity, intermarriage, and generational change. Among these, assimilation provides the main theoretical framework for the study.

Assimilation has long been used in sociology to explain how minority groups adapt to wider society and how identities change over time. Early assimilation theory suggested that cultural and social differences between minority groups and the wider society would gradually decline over generations (Alba & Nee, 2014). Gordon's (1964) model

of assimilation is particularly important because it showed that assimilation is not a single process but occurs across several dimensions including cultural adaptation, social integration, intermarriage, and civic participation. This idea is useful for this study because it allows us to see that Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling may assimilate in some areas of life – such as language, marriage, or social networks – while still maintaining certain cultural practices, religious traditions, and community memories.

However, later scholars criticized early assimilation theory for assuming that minorities would simply become part of a dominant culture. More recent scholars have redefined assimilation in more flexible ways (Alba & Nee, 2014). Instead of seeing assimilation as the disappearance of ethnic identity, it is now often understood as a process in which social boundaries between groups gradually become less rigid (Alba & Nee, 2014). Ethnic identity may not disappear completely, but it may become less important in everyday interaction (Alba & Nee, 2014). This idea is particularly relevant for Anglo-Indians, because their identity has always involved living between cultures rather than belonging fully to one.

Intermarriage is also an important theme in both assimilation theory and Anglo-Indian studies. For Anglo-Indians, intermarriage has a more complex meaning because the community itself has historically emerged through mixed marriages (James, 2010). In contemporary contexts, intermarriage may indicate integration into local society, but it may also change usage of languages, food practices, family traditions, and the way identity is passed on to the next generation (Andrews, 2005). In a place like Darjeeling, where Anglo-Indians live in close contact with Nepali-speaking and other communities, intermarriage may play a major role in shaping identity and belonging.

The research highlights another important issue - the everyday cultural practices. Whereas literature on Anglo-Indians has to a large extent focused on history, law, migration, and employment, less attention has been given to everyday life. The research supports how identity is often maintained not through laws or official recognition but through daily practices such as church attendance, festivals, food, music, language use, schooling, and family gatherings. These everyday practices are important because they show how identity is lived rather than simply defined. This

study therefore looks at identity through everyday life rather than only through history or legal categories.

The research further understands how generational change is important for understanding Anglo-Indian identity today. While respondents from older generations recalled how the community had stronger institutions, more employment opportunities, and closer community networks earlier, younger generations are growing up in a different social environment with growing number of intermarriages, more migration, and integration into broader local society. This raises an important question about whether younger Anglo-Indians still strongly identify with the community, or whether identity is becoming more symbolic and less socially organised. These questions have not been explored in the context of Darjeeling.

Overall, the literature shows that we know a great deal about the historical formation of Anglo-Indian identity and about migration after Independence, but we know much less about how Anglo-Indians live and understand their identity in smaller regional contexts such as Darjeeling today. This study therefore builds on existing historical and sociological research but shifts the focus to everyday life, intermarriage, generational change, and regional belonging in the hills.

Rather than viewing assimilation simply as the disappearance of Anglo-Indian identity, this study approaches it as a gradual and negotiated process. Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling may be integrated into local society through language, marriage, education, and social networks, while still maintaining certain cultural traditions and community memories. The study therefore argues that Anglo-Indian identity in Darjeeling is not disappearing but changing and adapting to new social realities. By focusing on everyday life and generational change, this research aims to show how identity continues to evolve in the hills, shaped by history but also by present social relationships and regional context.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from an ongoing ethnographic study, initiated in 2022, on members of the Anglo-Indians residing in the broader Darjeeling district of West

Bengal. For the purposes of this study, “Darjeeling” includes Darjeeling Town, Kurseong, Sonada, and Siliguri, reflecting both hill and foothill locations where Anglo-Indian families are currently concentrated.

The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted between November 2022 and December 2024. Fieldwork included participant observation in 23 individuals across four locations: Siliguri (8 households), Kurseong (6), Sonada (5), and Darjeeling Town (4). Household selection was initially informed by prior field knowledge of Anglo-Indian settlement patterns in the region and subsequently expanded through snowball sampling. Participants were recruited through community referrals and voluntary participation.

In total, 23 individuals (aged 30–70) were interviewed, each at least twice. Interviews were conducted primarily in person; where necessary, follow-up conversations took place via telephone or digital media calls. In this study, “ethnographic” refers to sustained engagement with participants in their domestic and community settings, combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with participant observation to understand everyday practices, kinship relations, religious life, and identity formation. All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was conducted collaboratively by the authors. Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were coded to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The principal themes included: (1) Regional Belonging Over Colonial Identity; (2) Generational Change: Fading Colonial Memory and Shifting Attachments; (3) Intermarriage and Boundary Blurring: Family as the Site of Identity Transformation (4) Food and Ritual as Selective Heritage. This analytical approach enabled us to interpret how historical legacies, social change, and everyday interactions shape the evolving identities of Anglo-Indians in the Darjeeling region.

DATA AND FINDINGS

Regional Belonging Over Colonial Identity

This section elaborates how Anglo-Indian individuals in the Darjeeling region understand themselves today. While their ancestry is linked to colonial history, their everyday lives are deeply rooted in the primarily Nepali-speaking cultural world of the

hills. Their stories show that identity is not fixed. It changes through language, food, marriage, neighbourhood ties, and daily interaction. In many cases, regional belonging feels more relevant than inherited colonial identity.

Marlina Robins, a 48-year-old Anglo-Indian woman living in Siliguri in the Darjeeling district, works as a head nurse in a private hospital. She lives with her husband and describes her life as closely connected to Nepali culture. She says:

> I've grown up speaking Nepali, eating Nepali food, and being surrounded by Nepali relatives and friends. That's who I am, really. But I still go to church, and I speak English well — those are the only things that remind me I'm Anglo-Indian. Sometimes it feels like that part of my identity is just… historical, something that doesn't mean much anymore in real life.

Her words show how everyday life shapes identity. Although she is Anglo-Indian by heritage, her language, food habits, and social circle are mostly Nepali. The only parts of her Anglo-Indian identity that remain visible are her English fluency and church attendance. She also keeps in touch with a few Anglo-Indian relatives and friends in Calcutta and Australia, but even those connections feel distant. For her, being Anglo-Indian feels more like a memory than a living reality.

Judith Kathleen, a 70-year-old retired school teacher living in Kurseong, reflects on similar changes. She lives with her extended family and remains active in church and community events. She says:

> As I look back on my heritage, I recognize how deeply the Anglo-Indian community has woven itself into the larger Indian fabric, even as it continues to carry traces of its distinct past. Our presence in places like Darjeeling reveals a quiet negotiation between belonging and difference, between adaptation and remembrance. In many ways, our story mirrors the broader journey of India itself — a constant dialogue between continuity and change.

Judith feels that the meaning of being Anglo-Indian has reduced over time in Darjeeling. Many Anglo-Indians are now fully integrated into the wider social fabric of the hills, which includes Nepali and Bengali Hindu communities. In her family, different religious festivals such as Diwali, Eid, and Christmas are celebrated together. Daily life reflects a blending of customs rather than strict boundaries. For her, Anglo-Indian identity is still important, but it exists alongside many other influences.

Dipti Orchard, in her late fifties, lives in Sonada. A retired school principal, she was born and raised in the hills. Her mother belonged to a Nepali tribal background, and this has shaped her identity strongly. Although she has Anglo-Indian ancestry, she identifies primarily as Nepali. Her connection to Anglo-Indian heritage is limited mostly to knowing about her grandfather's Irish roots. She feels more connected to her maternal culture than to Christianity. Her upbringing, surroundings, and community ties all strengthened her Nepali identity. In her case, the regional identity is not secondary — it is central. The Anglo-Indian background exists, but it does not define her daily life.

Gracy Kepler, a 68-year-old resident of Darjeeling town, shares a similar experience. She spent many years working as a floor manager in a well-known hotel. She says:

> Most of the people around me are Nepali — my neighbours, my in-laws, even the way we celebrate festivals has become completely Nepali. It's what I live and breathe every day. I've adapted to that rhythm so naturally that I don't really think about being Anglo-Indian unless someone specifically asks or points it out. It's almost as if that part of my identity is slowly slipping into the background. The only real traces that remain are when I speak in English, or when I go to church on Sundays. Those moments remind me of who I was supposed to be — but they feel distant, like echoes of a past that no longer fits into my present life.

Her reflection shows how identity can become situational. She does not reject her Anglo-Indian background, but it no longer shapes her everyday sense of self. It appears only in certain moments — when she speaks English or attends church. Otherwise, her life follows the rhythm of Nepali culture around her. Across these narratives, a clear pattern emerges. Language, food, marriage, neighbourhood, and festivals create a strong sense of regional belonging. English and Christianity remain as links to Anglo-Indian heritage, but they are limited markers. For many individuals in Darjeeling, being Anglo-Indian is not a dominant identity in daily life. Instead, it exists quietly in the background, while regional and local identities take the lead. These stories show that identity is not static. It shifts over generations and responds to social surroundings. In Darjeeling, for many Anglo-Indians, regional belonging has become more meaningful than colonial memory.

Generational Change: Fading Colonial Memory and Shifting Attachments

The narratives show a clear generational difference. This difference is defined here as those shaped by the pre-Independence and early post-Independence period, and those born in the later post-Independence years. Older respondents closely link their Anglo-Indian identity to memories of colonial institutions, strong family ties, and lively community gatherings. In contrast, younger respondents, especially those born in recent decades, find these memories distant. They feel more like stories or records rather than experiences from their daily lives.

Dipti Orchard (55) captures the affective weight of inherited colonial memory when she recalls:

> I remember my grandfather — he came from Ireland and worked in the British army… Just knowing that part of our family came from so far away always made me feel a bit different… Back then, there was still this idea that we were a bit apart, a bit distinct from everyone else.

Her narrative situates Anglo-Indian identity within transnational genealogies and community-specific rituals, such as Christmas dances, Easter gatherings, carefully maintained dress codes. These practices functioned as symbolic boundaries that marked the community as socially distinct.

Yet Orchard simultaneously acknowledges transformation:

> We married Nepalis, Bengalis, others… Now, my children hardly think of themselves as Anglo-Indian in the way I once did… I don't think we lost our culture — I think it just became something more flexible.

Dipti Orchard's narrative reflects assimilation as a gradual and relational process, where earlier symbolic boundaries – such as colonial memory and community rituals – helped maintain group distinctiveness. Her account of intermarriage and shifting self-identification illustrates boundary blurring, in which Anglo-Indian identity adapts through everyday interaction with surrounding communities rather than disappearing entirely. This aligns with contemporary assimilation theory, which views identity change as flexible and negotiated, allowing cultural continuity alongside social integration.

In contrast, Elliot Robinson (30) articulates a markedly different orientation toward the past:

> While growing up, I honestly did not think much about my identity as an Anglo-Indian… It all felt very distant to me… I don't feel a strong connection to that part of our history… We are more rooted in our local

> and regional surroundings than in colonial legacies we never really experienced.

The decline of colonial clubs, schools dominated by Anglo-Indians, and exclusive social spaces has weakened the institutions that once supported Anglo-Indian distinctiveness.. What emerges is a locally embedded, regionally grounded sense of belonging rather than a historically mediated one. Thus, generational change is not simply demographic; it represents a shift in the symbolic resources through which identity is constructed. For the older generation, colonial ancestry provides meaning. For the younger generation, it carries limited emotional or political relevance.

Intermarriage and Boundary Blurring: Family as the Site of Identity Transformation

Intermarriage appears repeatedly in respondents' narratives as a central mechanism of social change. Joseph Rozario (63) directly links community decline to marital patterns, noting that marriages between Anglo-Indians and Nepali (Hindu, Buddhist and Christian) or Bengali Hindu families have become increasingly common. While earlier generations emphasized endogamy to preserve communal cohesion, contemporary families are far more ethnically and culturally mixed.

As Dipti Orchard reflects: "We married Nepalis, Bengalis, others. The festivals we celebrated started to blend." This blending is not merely symbolic—it restructures kinship networks, language use, food habits, and child-rearing practices. Family becomes the primary site where identity boundaries are negotiated and softened. Children growing up in such households inherit multiple cultural repertoires simultaneously. Over time, the category 'Anglo-Indian' becomes less a fixed ethnic marker and more one strand within a composite identity. From a sociological perspective, intermarriage destabilizes the idea of 'pure' lineage and challenges the reproduction of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1988). In Darjeeling, where Nepali linguistic and cultural dominance shapes public life, Anglo-Indian families increasingly adapt to regional norms. The shift reflects broader post-independence transformations in India, where colonial-era intermediary communities have gradually been absorbed into regional and linguistic formations.

Importantly, respondents do not frame this process purely as loss. Rather, they describe it as adaptation. Orchard's insistence that "we didn't lose our culture" but made it "more flexible" suggests that identity transformation operates through negotiation rather than abrupt rupture. In this sense, the decline of Anglo-Indian distinctiveness is neither simply demographic nor entirely cultural. It is relational. Through intermarriage, everyday interaction, and generational reinterpretation, identity boundaries have become increasingly permeable. The Anglo-Indian community in Darjeeling has not disappeared; rather, it has been reconstituted within broader regional and multiethnic social structures.

Food and Ritual as Selective Heritage

Among Anglo-Indians in Darjeeling, colonial culinary legacies and Christian festive practices continue to shape community life, though no longer as everyday routines. Instead, they have acquired a more symbolic and ritualized character. Food, particularly during Christmas, operates as a condensed marker of identity—less a matter of daily sustenance and more a performative reaffirmation of belonging.

As Judith Kathleen (70 year old) reflected during the interview, the preparation of duck roast, pork roast, and fruitcake during Christmas is not merely culinary labour but an act of remembrance. Even if such dishes are prepared only once a year, they sustain intergenerational continuity. Her narrative suggests that heritage is not preserved through constant repetition but through meaningful ritual moments. The roast on the table, the cake shared after church, and the gathering of family members together transform food into a symbolic archive of Anglo-Indian memory. In this sense, cuisine becomes a cultural text through which identity is narrated and transmitted.

What is sociologically significant is the shift in frequency and context. Dishes that may once have been part of more regular domestic consumption are now largely confined to festive occasions. Heritage thus becomes selective – activated at particular ritual times such as Christmas, rather than embedded in everyday life. This selectivity does not necessarily indicate decline; rather, it reflects adaptation within a post-colonial and regionally Nepali-dominated social environment.

At the same time, the consumption of these festive foods by Nepali, Bengali Hindu, and Muslim neighbours during Christmas indicates a subtle process of cultural circulation. While these communities may not prepare such dishes throughout the year, their participation during Christmas suggests a tacit recognition and localized incorporation of Anglo-Indian celebratory culture. Food here becomes a site of negotiated coexistence, where symbolic boundaries remain but are softened through shared participation.

The experiences of Dipti Orchard, Patricia Gomes, Marline Robins, and Joseph further illustrate how everyday practices differ from ritual affirmations. While Christmas and church attendance retain symbolic importance, daily food habits often reflect Nepali staples such as dal, rice, sabzi, and momos. These everyday practices root individuals within the regional cultural landscape of Darjeeling. In Orchard's case, her mother's Nepali food traditions reflect a process of cultural assimilation. Everyday practices gradually connect with the surrounding social environment. Rather than showing a complete loss of identity, these changes demonstrate how assimilation works through adaptation in family life and social relationships. This highlights assimilation theory's view that minority identities can continue even as cultural boundaries become less strict through ongoing interaction with the wider community.

Similarly, Patricia Gomes and Marline Robins maintain Christian religious identification through church participation, yet their daily cultural rhythms are closely aligned with Nepali social norms. Joseph's selective attendance at church – primarily on special occasions – further underscores how religious practice itself becomes episodic and symbolic rather than strictly doctrinal.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that Anglo-Indian identity in Darjeeling is neither abandoned nor rigidly preserved. Instead, it is reconfigured through selective retention. Food and ritual – particularly Christmas, the roast, and church gatherings – serve as concentrated sites where heritage is invoked, performed, and made visible. Everyday life may reflect regional assimilation, but ritual moments reactivate a distinct historical consciousness. Thus, heritage operates less as an unbroken continuity and more as a symbolic repertoire – mobilized at specific times to sustain memory, affirm community, and negotiate belonging within a plural and changing social landscape.

DISCUSSION: REGIONAL EMBEDDING, GENERATIONAL SHIFT, AND SELECTIVE HERITAGE IN DARJEELING

The literature on Anglo-Indian identity has largely emphasized colonial classification, legal definition, and post-Independence migration (James, 2010; Abel, 1989; Charlton-Stevens, 2016). Early mixed communities did not consider themselves as one group and were described with various terms like mestiço or metis. These terms reflected different regional and colonial contexts (Carton, 2000; Lawford, 1978; Weston, 1939). It was only later, especially after 1911, that the term "Anglo-Indian" gained wider acceptance, helping to unite these groups under a common identity (Blunt et al., 2012). Researchers have demonstrated how this identity was shaped by certain jobs and institutions, particularly in the railways and colonial services (Bear, 2006; Andrews, 2005). More recent studies have started to explore smaller towns and regional differences rather than just big cities (Andrews & Roy, 2021). They have also looked at contemporary identity and belonging (Andrews & Raj, 2021). Still, areas like Darjeeling are less studied. This research aims to address that gap by examining how identity is experienced and reshaped in everyday life.

Historically, Anglo-Indian identity was structured through colonial governance, racial hierarchies, and legal categorization. Naming and classification determined access to employment, education, and political safeguards, producing a community that was simultaneously recognized and marginal. However, the narratives collected in Darjeeling indicate a shift away from legal and genealogical self-definitions toward everyday modes of belonging. Respondents rarely invoked constitutional categories or colonial ancestry as primary markers of identity. Instead, they described themselves through language, food practices, neighbourhood interaction, and kinship ties. For many who have lived their entire lives in the hills, fluency in Nepali and participation in local social networks constitute the core of their social identity. Anglo-Indian heritage is acknowledged, yet it no longer organizes daily life in a dominant way. Identity thus moves from a bureaucratically recognized minority status to a locally negotiated and socially embedded experience.

During the colonial and early postcolonial periods, railway colonies, English-medium schools, church networks, and community associations reinforced social boundaries

and reproduced a sense of collective cohesion. In contemporary Darjeeling, these institutional supports have considerably weakened. Younger respondents expressed limited engagement with community-specific organizations and minimal awareness of earlier political safeguards. The disappearance of exclusive clubs, occupation-specific networks, and segregated schooling has reduced the structural reinforcement of ethnic difference. As a result, Anglo-Indian identity persists less as an institutionalized formation and more as a familial and symbolic inheritance. The erosion of these institutional bases contributes to the softening of boundaries between Anglo-Indians and other regional communities.

Generational differentiation further illuminates this transformation. Older respondents retain affective connections to colonial ancestry and recall community dances, festive gatherings, and a shared sense of distinctiveness. For them, colonial memory functions as a meaningful symbolic resource, even as they acknowledge social change and integration. Younger respondents, by contrast, experience this history as distant and abstract. Colonial ancestry appears as inherited knowledge rather than lived experience. Their identities are shaped primarily through socialization within Nepali-speaking peer groups, workplaces, and neighbourhoods. In the absence of institutional separation, regional embeddedness becomes the dominant frame of belonging. Generational change, therefore, is not merely demographic but symbolic: it reflects a shift in the resources through which identity is constructed and given meaning.

Intermarriage emerges as a central mechanism through which these transformations unfold. Respondents described marriages between Anglo-Indians and Nepali Hindus, Nepali Christians, tribal communities, and Bengali Hindus as increasingly common. These unions reshape kinship networks, linguistic practices, festival celebrations, and child-rearing patterns. The family becomes the primary site where identity boundaries are negotiated and redefined. Rather than interpreting intermarriage as cultural loss, participants frequently described it as adaptation and flexibility. Anglo-Indian identity becomes one strand within a composite familial identity rather than a rigid ethnic category. Over time, symbolic boundaries become permeable, not through abrupt rupture but through gradual relational integration. The community is not disappearing; it is being reconstituted within broader regional and multiethnic structures.

One of the most significant findings concerns the transformation of cultural practices into selective and ritualized expressions of heritage. Colonial culinary traditions and Christian festive observances, particularly Christmas, continue to hold importance. The preparation of roast meats and fruitcake, participation in church services, and family gatherings function as concentrated moments of remembrance and affirmation. Yet these practices are largely confined to ritual occasions. Everyday food habits reflect Nepali staples such as dal, rice, sabzi, and momos, and church attendance is often episodic rather than strictly regular. Heritage, therefore, becomes ritualized rather than habitual – activated during specific ceremonial moments instead of embedded in daily routine.

Importantly, these festive practices frequently involve participation from Nepali, Bengali Hindu, and Muslim neighbours, suggesting a subtle process of cultural circulation and shared celebration. Food and ritual become sites of negotiated coexistence where symbolic distinctiveness is maintained, even as everyday life reflects deep regional integration. Heritage operates less as continuous separation and more as a symbolic repertoire that can be mobilized to sustain memory and affirm community within a plural social landscape.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Anglo-Indian identity in Darjeeling is being reshaped within a multiethnic regional framework. Anglo-Indian identity in the hills survives as layered and situational – foregrounded during ritual moments and backgrounded in ordinary social interaction. Regional belonging, particularly within the Nepali-speaking cultural environment, provides the primary structure of integration and social meaning. Colonial memory persists, but it no longer organizes social life as it once did. Rather than indicating decline, the evidence points toward processes of adaptation and gradual assimilation within changing social and cultural contexts. Anglo-Indian identity in Darjeeling has shifted from institutionalized distinctiveness to relational embeddedness. It continues to evolve – shaped by historical legacies yet grounded firmly in the lived realities of contemporary regional life.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how the post-Independence Darjeeling Anglo-Indian community understand and lives its identity within a changing social frame. The results indicate that Anglo-Indian identity in this region is neither simply disappearing nor remaining unchanged. On the contrary, it is slowly being reformed across life, via interactions, intermarriage, generations changing each other, and adjusting to and adapting to the broader regional landscape. Identity is best understood, therefore, not as a static colonial heritage, but as something that is inhabited, lived, and negotiated in everyday social interaction. One contribution of the research is an examination of assimilation in the contemporary Anglo-Indian landscape of Darjeeling. Assimilation here does not mean the community has completely lost its identity. Rather, it is to describe a process of gradual social and cultural adjustment to the localised Nepali-speaking community of the hills. For example, while many Anglo-Indians take part in Nepali language use, local food habits, networks within nearby neighbourhoods, and regional cultural practices, which only suggests them becoming integrated into the larger social arena for all that they share in it. Meanwhile, Christianity, the English language or something like Christmas still holds symbolic significance as markers of ancestry and community memory. This evidence indicates that both assimilation and identity preservation are occurring simultaneously, not at cross purposes. This paper also makes clear that assimilation is not a sudden, planned process but rather occurs gradually in everyday social relations. Intermarriage, sharing of local neighbourhoods, schools, and places of employment have diminished earlier social distinctions between Anglo-Indians and others in the hills. The change plays out in families and on the daily grind, where cultural practices blend and new ties to the group are made visible. Regional identity becomes increasingly relevant in day-to-day life, and so does Anglo-Indian identity, which has become more situational, emerging for most people at festivals, religious practices, or family reunions. Ultimately, the research indicates that minority identity does not always appear separate or distinct in postcolonial society. Minority culture often survives in the margins of everyday life, not in isolation, but in interaction with the larger society through assimilation and reinterpretation. Identity itself comes to be something that is negotiated and adapted rather than strictly preserved. This shows that minority identity is not disappearing, but changing its form and meaning in contemporary society. Anglo-Indian identity still exists in Darjeeling, but it is not rigid; instead, it is layered and flexible. Although it may not always be visible in everyday interactions, it continues to live through memory, religion, and family stories. Data on

assimilation has shown that assimilation is the ongoing social process where identity becomes different based on the environment, and the society adapts to new social and cultural norms while still maintaining identity to the previous.

AUTHOR BIOS

Brian Gomes *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of AISS (Sociology) at Amity University, Noida. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur. Prior to this, he taught at Salesian College, Darjeeling, for three years, where he gained valuable teaching and research experience in a region marked by diverse cultural dynamics. His research interests include social gerontology, digital sociology, Anglo-Indian communities, the sociology of food, and urban sociology, reflecting a sustained engagement with questions of cultural identity, aging, and contemporary urban life.*

Shilpita Gine *has completed her doctoral studies in Sociology from Pondicherry Central University as University Grant Commission Junior and Senior Research Fellowship (UGC-JRF/SRF) Awardee. She has previously served as an Assistant Professor in Salesian College, West Bengal for three years. Dr. Gine specializes in Sociology of Civil Spaces, Religious Minorities in India and Sociology of Gender.*

Joyce Adelene Kempe *holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Sociology. Her undergraduate dissertation offered an in-depth exploration of the Anglo-Indian community within Darjeeling, establishing a foundation for her ongoing scholarly pursuits. Her primary research interests lie at the intersection of the Anglo-Indian diaspora, the Sociology of Culture, and the Sociology of Religion, with a specific focus on identity formation and cultural heritage.*

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