

Colonial and Post-Colonial Hybridities: Eurasians in India

Research >
South Asia

Among the enduring legacies of the colonial encounter are any number of contemporary 'mixed-race' populations, descendants of the offspring of sexual unions involving European men (colonial officials, soldiers, traders, and so forth) and local women. This research concerns one such group, the Eurasians, or Anglo-Indians. Despite the withdrawal of the British from India, the community has persisted, shaped indelibly by its colonial heritage, yet also transformed by post-colonial circumstances.

By Lionel Caplan

During the centuries of Britain's imperial rule a substantial number of officers, soldiers, and civilians served the East India Company and, later, the Government of India. Men of diverse European nationalities – mainly British, but others as well – also came to trade or seek employment in various sectors of the colonial economy. Many established domestic relationships with Indian women, resulting in the birth of children and the emergence of a 'mixed-race' or 'hybrid' population. Eurasians, or Anglo-Indians as they were subsequently to be designated, settled mostly in and around urban centres like Madras (recently renamed Chennai), the locus of the present research. While we know that they descended from a medley of different national groups on the paternal side, it is virtually impossible to say more about the initial maternal progenitors other than that they were of disparate caste and religious origins. In time, their progeny intermarried and became aware of themselves as distinct from the surrounding Indian population, with a common language (English) and religion (Christianity), as well as other shared cultural attributes. The colonial government's fluctuating policies towards this group contributed to the economic distress of the majority, while recent developments have driven many further into poverty; only some have benefited from new opportunities in the post-colonial economy. Since India's independence, a significant proportion of Anglo-Indians – as many as half – have left India to settle in the West, chiefly Britain and Australia. Today, the Anglo-Indian population in India totals approximately 125,000,

with perhaps 10-15,000 resident in Madras. As in the past, they tend to be concentrated in particular neighbourhoods, generally in central areas of the city where their churches and schools are to be found. Recently, however, rising land costs and house rentals have propelled many into outlying suburbs, and led to greater dispersal of the community.

'Hybrid' groups, however demographically insignificant, invite serious scholarly attention because, among other things, they blur the divide between colonizer and colonized, questioning the very efficacy of these labels (Stoler 1989). Moreover, they not only underline the impossibility of viewing rulers and ruled as universal and undifferentiated categories, but question the analyst's treatment of Europeans and colonizers as synonymous. Such populations also beg a host of queries about continuities and transformations in the post-colonial world. How does a 'hybrid' community imagine and describe itself to others and to itself? How does it understand its past, contemplate its future, and live in the present? What practices does it posit as marking its 'culture' and so, its distinctiveness? What are the ingredients of this culture given the diverse origins of its population, and what changes in these cultural habits have occurred with the withdrawal of the colonial power? We cannot hope to attend to all of these questions here, although I have tried to do so elsewhere (see Caplan 2001). For the present it is important to inquire about the attitudes of the British to this 'mixed-race' population.

Colonial attitudes

Like similar 'mixed-race' groups in the colonized world, Anglo-Indians

were seen by their British rulers, at times, as potential enemies and, at others, as allies in their imperial adventure, alternately preferred and promoted or thwarted and victimized. This kind of oscillation was especially evident in the occupational realm; in the 'early' colonial period, Anglo-Indian males were relatively free to follow a range of activities. For a time from the end of the eighteenth century they were excluded from many civil and most military services under the government, but by the middle of the nineteenth century they were allowed favoured if restricted access to positions of intermediate responsibility in central government sectors (railways, telegraphs, customs, etc.) and, from the early years of the twentieth century, in the wake of nationalist pressures, they were increasingly exposed to competition from members of the wider society in virtually all areas of their 'traditional' employment spheres. These last developments exacerbated the extent of poverty within the Anglo-Indian fold but, at the same time, as women increasingly entered the workplace, this hardship was somewhat mitigated; for some decades now many households at the lower end of the class hierarchy have relied on women as the main providers, a factor which has profound implications for gender roles and relations within the community.

Thus, in the post-independence period Anglo-Indians have gradually lost the protected status they enjoyed in certain occupational niches, and have had to survive in an unsteady economic climate, increasingly subject to global influences which have, if anything, adversely affected those least educated and skilled. Without the protection afforded to 'scheduled castes' or 'backward classes' – who comprise the bulk of the disadvantaged in contemporary Indian society – the Anglo-Indian poor feel themselves to be suffering disproportionately. At the same time, the colonial ceiling which confined Anglo-Indians within certain work spaces lifted with the withdrawal of the British, and today there is a small but growing elite – highly educated, cosmopolitan, professional, and comfortably-off – which has become part of the larger upper middle class in India, and benefited from new liberalization and structural adjustment policies.

There is a wide consensus among scholars of colonialism in India that, from the end of the eighteenth century, a transformation occurred in the relationship between British rulers and those over whom they exercised dominion. The growth of 'scientific racism' in early nineteenth-century Europe saw the 'hybrid' become a trope for moral failure and degeneration, and led to the increasingly negative evaluation and status abasement of Anglo-Indians by British elites in India. Branded with a number of degrading epithets, they became figures of contempt and

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ridicule, and were seen as combining the worst qualities of both 'founding races'. These attitudes were reflected in English-language fiction about India, much of it written by colonial Europeans (Nabar and Bharucha 1994). In both life and fiction they were frequently portrayed in disparaging stereotypes, many of which focused on women, who were regarded as the principal mimics of European mores and seducers of their men.

Self-identification

Notwithstanding the Euro-colonial social practices and attitudes which distanced and demeaned this 'mixed-race'

dynamic – a remarkable degree of self-awareness and group consciousness from at least the early nineteenth century. In spite of their disparate origins they came to regard themselves as possessing a distinct identity of their own (Hawes 1996).

From the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, when it became apparent that British rule in India was drawing to a close, increasingly voices were heard within the community urging alliance with the nationalist project. In the contemporary setting, Anglo-Indian elites, who share the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and cosmopolitan ambience of India's affluent, insist on a strong local connection. At the other end of the spectrum, among the most disadvantaged, enveloped in the surroundings of the poor, a variety of credentials are enunciated, as alternative forms of association become possible. It is principally within the middle ranks of Anglo-India, where economic uncertainties and 'downward mobility' have been most acutely felt, that claims to a European pedigree continue to be declared in contemporary Madras. These claims, however, either meet derision or fall on deaf ears both within the now dominant groups in Indian society, including the elites of their own community, and outside it, where they are meant to be heard by governments in the 'first world' assumed to be in search of culturally westernized immigrant populations.

Boundaries, identities, cultures


The post-colonial condition is frequently represented by its theorists as being characterized by, among other things, fluid boundaries, multiple identities, and creolized cultures. The implication is that contemporary ambiguities contrast with the clear-cut identities of the colonial period. This research questions the validity of such a distinction, insisting that these ambiguities have been a part of the colonial past as well. The efforts of European colonizers to demarcate subject populations were frequently undermined by the very people on whom they sought to impose their classifications, giving rise to porous boundaries and permeable groupings. For one thing, British census officials and the Anglo-Indian lead-



All photos by Lionel Caplan

Two portraits of Anglo-Indians.





ership were equally perplexed not only by the tendency for Anglo-Indians to declare themselves Europeans, but by the significant numbers of those apparently not deserving of an Anglo-Indian label who proclaimed themselves as such to the census takers. For another, marriage outside the group, especially at both extremes of the class spectrum, led to 'evaporation' out of and 'infiltration' into its ranks, resulting in extremely porous boundaries and fluid identities. The greater frequency of these external unions since independence has undoubtedly created new hybridities, increased the complexity of identity claims, and enhanced the possibilities for and range of such choices. Anglo-Indian women – mainly but not exclusively from better-off families – have continued to make marriages outside the Anglo-Indian fold, while many males from the least well-off families, denied connubium within the community, have been compelled to seek partners among the poor outside it.

Such fluidity is echoed in the cultural domain. Most Anglo-Indians insist that certain cultural habits – related especially to their kinship, religion, language, dress, food, and marriage regimes – are distinctive of their way of life, and differentiate them from other groups in the society. However, as we might expect, class location has an important impact on the practice of culture; people in the middle ranks clothe and feed themselves and celebrate their marriages in somewhat different ways from those at either end of the social order. Further, though widely perceived and even celebrated as unfailingly – and stereotypically – Western, Anglo-Indian ways of life have clearly been much influenced by cultural practices in their local surroundings, and increasingly so since India's independence, notwithstanding the impacts of westernization and globalization. The urban cultural milieu in which Anglo-Indians were and continue to be situated is therefore best viewed as creolized. Such an approach stresses the notion of a continuum, thereby acknowledging not only diversity *within* the group, but mutual influence and overlap *between* cultural groups, and hence Anglo-India's constant negotiation with 'mainstream' society and culture. In this sense, Anglo-Indians serve as both a factor in and a potent reminder of the fluidity of the urban social environment during the colonial no less than the post-colonial periods. ◀

References

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