

Anglo-Indians: the Dilemma of Identity

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Abstract

On the eve of departure of the British from India, the Anglo-Indians found themselves in an invidious situation – caught between the European attitude of superiority towards Indian and Anglo-Indian alike and the Indian mistrust of them, due to their aloofness and their Western – oriented culture. One of the problems the Anglo-Indian community has always faced is one of 'Identity'. In the early days of the colonial rule it was difficult for the Anglo-Indians to answer with certainty the question "Who am I?" As a genuine community consciousness developed this identity dilemma lessened but it was never firmly resolved. With the British leaving India and as opportunities for a resolution of identity conflict through migration faded a new identity orientation was necessary. Many Anglo-Indians who were unable to make such a turn-about of identity and feeling insecure without the protective imperial umbrella, opted to leave India. Thus, victims of dilemma and indiscretion throughout their existence thousands of Anglo-Indians left for safe shores – Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. For Anglo-Indians who have left India and settled abroad a similar problem of Identity again arises.

Introduction

This paper is a preliminary outline of the discourses surrounding the Anglo-Indians and their Dilemma of Identity. The Anglo-Indians were brought into being by the direct policies of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British traders and colonists. Warren Hastings was the first to use the term '*Anglo-Indian*' in the 18th century to describe both the British and their Indian-born children. The Directors of the British East India Company (which had been founded around 1629) paid one *pagola* or gold *mohur* (a guinea, coin) for each child born to an Indian mother and a European father, essentially, a family allowance. (Younger, C.1984) These children were "country-born" and amalgamated into the Anglo-Indian community, forming a bulwark for the British *Raj* (rule), a buffer but also a bridge between the rulers and the subjects.

Such encouragement, the ready employment given to Anglo-Indians by the East India Company, as well as the fact that they were treated no differently from the British ensured the growth of a mixed community. Anglo-Indian children were often sent to England to receive further education. And schools were established in Madras, Bangalore, Lucknow and other British settlements aimed at organising education to make Anglo-Indians fit for the departments of the public services. (Younger, C.1984)

Thus, the Anglo-Indian was the product of the confident European expansion of the 16th century. In the years of British colonial expansion, intermarriage between the British and the native females was encouraged, but soon after British power was established in India, this policy was reversed: it was feared that a mixed community might threaten the British rule.

The Anglo-Indians were discharged from all ranks of the army; they were barred from the Company's civil, military or marine services. The restrictions imposed closed a large area of

employment for them and they saw these actions as discriminatory because previously they were treated as British and they felt themselves to be British both by culture and inclination. Now they were no longer with the ruling elite. As Gaikwad asserts,

“these measures reduced the Anglo-Indian to political impotence and social degradation.” (Gaikwad, V.R. in Younger, C.1984)

It was within this milieu that Anglo-Indian families had to survive, but even this set-up was continuously changing. Cottrell observed that under the British Raj, the fortunes of the Anglo-Indians varied from the denial of jobs to favouritism in job placement. At the end of the colonial period and over ten years after Independence, the Anglo-Indians had a secure hold on positions in clerical jobs, railways, transport and communication. (Cottrell, A-B.1979)

In studies done in India by Gist and Wright (1967), forty male respondents were interviewed. Of them, 78% were in technical or skilled jobs. Gaikwad (1967) found 68% of employed Anglo-Indians interviewed were in the lower two categories of his classification. Very few entered private business and most had not been to college.

In addition, a series of interviews among Calcutta Anglo-Indians in 1972 revealed a set of reciprocal role relations between the sexes...greater emancipation of women, extensive unemployment of men...Anglo-Indian women became bread-winners ...men developed images of themselves patterned after their British fathers—felt that they were too good for menial work...Anglo-Indian girls, urged by parents not to marry too soon and to continue to support the older generation, frequently refused to marry men of their own community...sex roles skewed away from the traditional male dominance pattern . “Males are charming, convivial, and stay at home, females are competent and efficient achievers” (Schermerhorn, R. A.1973)

Aspirations for British (white) Identity

By the 19th century the British separated themselves from the coloured people but accepted fairer (and often wealthier) people of dual heritage as ‘*Anglo-Indian*’. Darker (and usually poorer) people were given the name ‘*Eurasian*’. Anglo-Indians were of British descent and British subjects; others claimed to be British to escape prejudice. The British did not however accept such identification. They did not see Anglo-Indians as kinsmen, socially viewing them as “*half-caste*” members who were morally and intellectually inferior to the sons and daughters of Britain.

The Anglo-Indians tried to counter this by trying to be more like the British; hence their campaign to be called ‘*Anglo-Indians*’ rather than ‘*Eurasians*’. ‘*Anglo-Indian*’ would mean a closer link with the Raj while ‘*Eurasian*’ was too general. (Bose, M.1979)

One of the contributing factors to the growth of community identification was that marriage outside the community had become rare by 1919. It was no longer acceptable for the British to marry an Indian or Anglo-Indian. (Younger, C. 1984) By the end of the 19th century it was *taboo* for all but the British men of low status to associate with Anglo-Indians or Indians.

Many of the prejudices of the British were adopted by the Anglo-Indians towards the Indian people of dark complexion, thus creating rejection of the Anglo-Indians by both British and Indian communities. Hence, they found themselves caught between the European attitude of

superiority towards Indian and Anglo-Indian and the Indian mistrust of them due to their aloofness and Western-oriented culture.

On both the social and cultural level they were alien to many other Indians, though kin to them on the biological level. In the words of Gaikwad,

“... mid-way between two cultural worlds, and under the peculiar conditions of their origin and socio-cultural development, Anglo-Indians could never get to know the West to which they aspired to belong, nor did they have emotional ties with India where they really belonged...”

(Gaikwad, V. R .1967)

Thus, they were victims of dilemma and indiscretion throughout their existence.

India's Independence

The somewhat sudden and unexpected departure of the British from Indian soil, posed a series of tangled problems involving critical choice making for this community. The pivotal point for Anglo-Indians was the hand-over of political power in 1947, and experiencing the insecurity of a minority group, thousands of Anglo-Indians left India for safer shores – Canada, New Zealand, England and Australia.

For those one hundred and fifty thousand Anglo-Indians who stayed behind, the Constitution of India provided more security than they dreamt of. The official definition of the term ‘*Anglo-Indian*’ accepted by the Government of India and stipulated in the new Constitution of Independent India is as follows:

“...an Anglo-Indian means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only...” (The Constitution of India, paragraph 366)

And after much debate that English was the mother tongue of the community and the claim that without English an individual cannot claim to be an Anglo-Indian in 1957, the following definition was approved:

“...an Anglo-Indian means a person whose mother-tongue is English and whose father or any of his progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is or was born within such territory of India of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only...” (D’Souza, A.A. in Younger, C.1984)

Even so, some of those still in India (1979) integrated well into the upper class Indian Hindu society. But many were poor, ignored by their community, forgotten by the Indians and left with their memories of past glories and a fondly created illusion of ‘*home*’, England. (Bose, M. 1979)

“They lived in an unrealistic world and many of them escaped into a Walter Mitty-like ‘white world’ called England, where they imagined everything was plentiful and

everyone was kind. It was 'home' in a sense which India could never be." (Minto, J.R. 1974)

Implied here is an image of 'home' as the site for everyday lived experience. It is a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice. Home here connotes the networks of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other 'significant others'. It signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a neighbourhood or a hometown that is a community 'imagined' in most part through daily encounter. This 'home' is a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it. It is a sense of 'feeling at home'. (Brah, A.1996)

Immigration to Australia

Many policy-makers were motivated by grandiose visions of Australia becoming a major component of the British Empire, and joining the ranks of the great populous nations like the United States. (Foster and Stockley, in Lopez, M. 2000)

The original goal of the immigration policy was the assimilation of migrants into Australia's predominantly Anglo-Celtic population as permanent settlers. Migrant selection was carefully managed to preserve the nation's ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Categories of potential migrants were ranked according to their racial and cultural affinity with British-Australians. The most preferred were Britons, followed by Northern Europeans. Southern Europeans, considered to be far less assimilable, were less desired. The least desired were Asians and other non-whites. The government offered financial inducements to migrants from the preferred categories. The least desired were virtually excluded according to the tenets of the White Australia Policy. (Lopez, M. 2000)

The Anglo-Indians have been immigrating to Australia in relatively large numbers since the early 1960s. In fact, they were among the first Asians to emigrate in the 1960s and 1970s with the relaxation of the White Australia Policy (Brawley, S. in Gilbert, A.1996). The earliest recorded suggestion of their immigration was made by the editor of The Eastern Times-an Anglo-Indian newspaper-on August 23,1851. (Varma, L.B. in Gilbert, A. 1996) At the time Australia was encouraging immigration and the Anglo-Indians were looking for greener pastures. (Gilbert, A.1996)

According to Gilbert, some Anglo-Indians did migrate in 1852 and 1854, and T.G.Clark, a Magistrate, confidently predicted that some day there would be unlimited demand for Anglo-Indians in Australia. An organisation called the South Australian Board of Advice and Correspondence for Anglo-Indian Colonisation was formed "to advise and assist Anglo-Indians desirous to settle in South Australia". (Varma, L.B. in Gilbert, A. 1996)

This migration to South Australia did not eventuate because there was a hardening of attitudes against Asian immigration in Australia and also, the Anglo-Indians were not skilled as "cultivators" and nor did they come under the category of "cheap labour" like the ethnic Indians studied by de Lepervanche (Gilbert, A.1996). The Anglo-Indians did have technical skills acquired from working on the railways and postal and telegraph services in India; skills needed in an expanding Australia. It was only in

1964 when the rules for entry of persons of mixed descent were eased that Anglo-Indians become admissible to Australia. (Richmond, A.H. and Rao, L. G. in Gilbert, A. 1996)

Identity

Philosophers such as Charles Taylor remind us, the discourse on identity is as old as modernity itself. Taylor discusses the origins of the concept and the discourse on identity in Western society. He points out the close, dialectical relationship between a notion of 'inwardly derived, personal, original identity' and the 'vital human need' for the public recognition of that identity within a given society.

"My discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others ... Yet inwardly derived, personal identity doesn't enjoy this recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange, and the attempt can fail. What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognised can fail." (Taylor, C. in Docker, J. and Fisher, G. 2000)

According to Fisher and Soon, while people may belong to multiple psychological communities, each has a primary community that reinforces norms, values, identities, and provides structures and social support systems that are crucial to the well being of its members. In some situations, people aspire to membership in a community but are rejected. Their paper examines the responses of coloured South Africans and Anglo-Indians in aspirations to membership in European communities. By use of status borrowing, relative advantage and social comparison, these groups tried to enhance the language and culture they shared with the Europeans, while rejecting the indigenous parts of their heritage. However, the European groups rejected them as '*inferiors*', while still providing them with some degree of status and privilege above that of the indigenous groups. It was found that socially constructed differences and social distances between communities, racism and other negative outcomes associated with rejection and marginality operated at social and psychological levels to suppress the members of the aspiring groups. Thus, they recommend that the understanding of responses to oppression and marginalisation should go beyond the individual level to include community level responses. (Fisher, A. and Soon, C.1996)

It is therefore apparent that a sense of '*identity*' develops through communication with '*significant others*' (George Herbert Mead in Docker and Fisher 2000). And this identity needs to be confirmed by being recognised. (Docker, J. and Fischer, G. 2000)

Identity Dilemma

Writers on identity refer to Erikson who first popularised the concept of '*identity*' and who felt that we first begin to conceptualise matters of identity at the very point in history when they become a problem.

One of the problems the Anglo-Indian community has always faced is one of *Identity*. Throughout much of the 18th Century Europeans and Indians variously defined them. Under these circumstances it was not easy for Anglo- Indians to develop a clear conception of their

own identity. Europeans tended to think of them as Indians with some European blood; Indians thought of them as Europeans with some Indian blood. The prejudices against them, real or imagined, or the prejudices that they themselves had against other Indians, were an obstacle to both group and individual identity. (Gist, N. P. 1972,1973)

The fact that Anglo-Indians were Indian nationals by birth but culturally-oriented to Britain often made their status confusing to themselves and to others. One Anglo-Indian School Principal in Calcutta stated the Dilemma of her own Identity as follows, "My heart is in England but my responsibilities are in India". Since then, she migrated to Great Britain. (Gist, N.P.1973)

Many Anglo-Indians felt that other Indians regard them as interlopers who do not want to qualify as authentic and loyal Indians. As one Indian in Bombay remarked with reference to the matter of identity, "Go to any Anglo-Indian home and what do you see? Almost invariably a picture of the British Royal Family." This is undoubtedly a half-truth but it reinforces the image that many Indians have of the community. (Gist, N.P.1972)

"Because of their alienation from both the British and the Indians they were literally forced to think of themselves as a people apart and this self-image has persisted." (Gist, N.P.1972).

It has not been easy for them to provide a satisfactory answer to the question ---- "Who am I?" Thoughtful Anglo-Indians acutely aware of the problem of identity and of the attitudes held by many Indians towards them point to their records of achievement in the interests of India and to the sacrifices made by Anglo-Indians in the military services. Some of the leaders of the community decry the migrations of their members to other countries, asserting that it is their duty to remain in India and work for equal rights and opportunities for all peoples. (Gist, N.P. 1972)

As a genuine community consciousness developed this identity dilemma lessened but it was never firmly resolved. With the British leaving India and as opportunities for a resolution of identity conflict through migration faded a new identity orientation was necessary. Many Anglo-Indians who were unable to make such a turn-about of identity and feeling insecure without the protective imperial umbrella, opted to leave India.

For the Anglo-Indians who left India and settled abroad a similar problem of Identity again arises. Is it possible or even desirable to retain their self-identity as Anglo-Indians?

"Can they identify with, say, England not merely as legal British nationals but in the fullest psychological sense of the term?" (Gist, N.P. 1972)

And about those Anglo-Indians who migrated to Australia, Gilbert quotes Younger as follows:

" Anglo-Indians entered the professions as doctors, engineers and journalists, gone into business, government, academic and computer technology. Beginning with limited resources, most now possess the trappings of material success-home, cars, television, video and surplus funds for entertainment and overseas holidays." (Younger, C. in Gilbert, A.1996)

And in Younger's view the reason for this success in integrating into Australian society was their Western lifestyle.

In colonial society it was the white-skinned Anglo-Indians who would have been capable of passing themselves off as British and would perhaps have better job opportunities and class privileges. (Gilbert, A.1996) Thus, the issue of skin colour is of particular relevance to the Australian Anglo-Indians, who range from white to black.

Writing about "skin colour", Gilbert points out that while many Anglo-Indians are physically indistinguishable from Anglo-Celtic Australians, many others are not and consequently became victims of discrimination and prejudice. The White Australia policy was starting to change during the 1960s but there were occasions when different coloured members of the same family could not enter Australia. He quotes as an example a case in 1964:

Despite being claimed by his twin brother, a man was rejected from immigrating to Australia, being classified as 'non-European' due to a 'swarthy and dark' complexion. Upon investigation Martin found that these twin brothers were born of a British Army father and an Indian born mother. In contrast, the other twin was fair and looked completely European in appearance. (Martin, H. in Gilbert, 1996)

This example echoes the following:

"...I know now and knew then that 'looks' mattered a great deal within the colonial regimes of power...because discourses about the body were crucial to the constitution of racism..." (Brah, A. 1996)

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the Identity Dilemma of the Anglo-Indians from the time of their origin in India. It puts into context the historical background and aspirations for British (white) identity of the Anglo-Indian community, specifically in South Australia.

Gaikwad has argued that the Anglo-Indians did not have emotional ties with India. However, it can be argued that some Anglo-Indians may have felt otherwise, and had bonds with India, albeit with an India and a culture that ceased to exist after India's Independence in 1947. And for those who migrated to Australia, 'India' could be 'home' although ideally 'England' had been considered 'home'.

Therefore, it is possible to explore responses to the question, "Who am I?" among the Anglo-Indians in South Australia. Do they desire to retain their identity as Anglo-Indians? Do they identify with their "Anglo" heritage as against their "Indian" heritage or vice-versa? In short, in the country they chose to migrate to, namely Australia do they still have aspirations for British (white) Identity? In other words, is there a dilemma of identity for the Anglo-Indians in Australia also?