



CYBER LINKS HELP ANGLO-INDIANS TO PRESERVE CULTURE

Lionel Lumb

An Anglo-Indian these days is almost a state of mind. Many who became part of the community's diaspora after India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947 never declare themselves as Anglo-Indians (AIs), and seem eager to disappear into their host societies in Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

But there are some who care enough about that unique heritage to try to preserve and celebrate it, and have done so with international gatherings every three years: in Britain in 1989; in Toronto, Canada, in 1992; in Perth, Australia, in 1995; and last year in India itself, officially in Bangalore but with a spirited follow-up in Calcutta, home to the largest number of AIs through the centuries. The year 2001 will see them gather in Auckland, New Zealand.

The much-anticipated reunion in Bangalore was a disappointment. It was racked by disagreement among rival AI groups within India, and the spirit of celebration so visible in Toronto and Perth turned joyless and sour. The 300 or so overseas AIs travelled to Bangalore awash with nostalgia, believing this would go down as the most important reunion of their community. Instead, they found dissension and a startling degree of uncaring for poorer home-country delegates among AI elites in India. Fortunately, what followed in Calcutta was more like the good old days. When AIs get together in cities like Toronto, they tend to relive the best parts of the good old days in India. They recall evenings at the club, the company of friends, dinners and great food, memorable parties, incomparable dance bands and fun-filled dances, and the general solidarity they felt as a community, often centred on a church or a social club. Forgotten or glossed over are the difficulties they survived: the clerical, subordinate or mid-management jobs that seemed their destiny, the promotions they saw going to the British in pre-independence days and to Indians

after 1947, the contempt and ridicule they often faced from both British and Indians because of their mixed race.

There were and are outstanding exceptions. Many AI families can point with pride to members who rose to the top in branches of the civil service, in education and even in private business. But the majority stumbled against a thus-far-and-no-farther syndrome. One reason was education. AIs had a highly developed system that gave them the finest of educations up to high school, and most members of the community benefited from it. But only a small percentage went on to university and very few took the final step to gain PhDs. That's partly because the jobs in which the British reserved quotas for them – in key services like the railways, the post and telegraph, the customs and the police – did not require university degrees. But it was also due to a traditional AI undervaluing of the merits of higher education. Unlike Indians, AI parents did not push their children beyond high school.

In some ways the best thing that happened to the community was to lose the patronage that British rule gave them...when it suited the British. Historically, AIs prospered when British fortunes in India were low, and suffered when the various emergencies during which the British needed the services of this most loyal group had passed. But with the British departure from India many AIs felt betrayed and abandoned and that they, too, should quit India. It's difficult to put hard figures to the AI population because so many members do not declare themselves. But it's thought that more now live outside South Asia, perhaps as many as 350,000, with fewer than 200,000 in India and Pakistan. Harry McClure, of the marvellously chipper and well-produced magazine, *Anglos in the Wind* (published in Madras), says there are 130,000 AIs in India.

Those who "got away" built on the skills they had acquired at surviving as a kind of buffer state between the ruling British and the resentful Indians. They turned with zest to competing in their new countries for jobs based on merit, qualifications and the individual's work ethic, and not on class, caste and "who you knew." Those who followed on the heels of the British went mostly to Britain. Later waves went to Australia, when that country dropped its whites-only immigration policy in the '60s, and to Canada and the United States. There has been little research in Canada. But

in Australia Dr. Adrian Gilbert has made an important study of Anglo-Indians who settled there. One of his most interesting findings is that Als in Australia (and the same is probably true of Canada as well, at least anecdotally) are doing better in Australia in both fact and perception than in Britain or, indeed, in India. As Dr. Gilbert puts it, India and Britain are both stratified societies, but in Australia Als are "just another immigrant group that had to establish themselves." In general, he says, Als are attaining relatively well both educationally and in social and economic terms in Australia.

But the situation for many of those who did not get away is far from good, and, as ever, prosperity is tied to education. In Madras and Calcutta there are AI slums. Perhaps the worst is Tiljallah, outside Calcutta on the way to Dum Dum airport. To quote a recent "Editors Note" in the Toronto newsletter, *Anglo-Indians in Touch*: "(Tiljallah) houses Anglo-Indians, mostly women and children. It is a pathetic sight, seeing these people living in huts, with no fresh water, no toilet facilities, and cooking next to open drains used as toilets." At the other end of the scale, better educated Als in India are prospering, with management positions and their own businesses. For example, Neil Brown, who was for years chairman of the Oxford University Press's India branch, is chairman of the Council for the Indian School Certificates Examination.

The other good news is that Anglo-Indians in the diaspora have begun to show increasing pride in their heritage. The Internet has made a significant difference, with many Web sites that make it easier for Als to stay in touch, for the younger generation to learn more about their history, and to discuss ways of preserving their culture. A California Web site is collecting oral history contributions. Perhaps best of all, Anglo-Indians have begun to contribute to various relief funds for their less fortunate members in India. Those who live outside India may have lost the country of their hearts, but at least the Web is giving them back their pride of community.

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