



WHO ARE THE ANGLO-INDIANS?

Margaret Deefholts

The world of Anglo-India began to vanish on August 15th, 1947, when a new nation was born. As the country threw off the shackles of two centuries of colonial rule and its people strode proud and free into the future, the British packed their bags, their polo sticks, their regimental jackets, and their memories—and went home to “Blighty”.

Not everyone, however, was glad to see them go. Among those left behind were more than 300,000 people of mixed European and Indian descent, who traced their English, French, Dutch or Portuguese ancestry from the paternal line going back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Of all the European traders (and colonists, as time went on), the British gained dominance in the guise of the East India Company. At that time, few women were up to making the arduous sea voyage and the cultural transition, from the soft green countryside of England to the searing plains of “Hindoostan”. Consequently the officers, ensigns and clerks of the Company were encouraged to marry local Indian women. Their children carried no stigma of mixed blood in those far-off days.

Later, however, with the construction of the Suez Canal in the 19th century, the travel time between the two countries was greatly reduced, and women no longer hesitated to sally forth from England to join husbands, or to seek marriage prospects among British army and civil service officers. They brought with them all the class snobbery and insularity of the Victorian era, and offspring of mixed descent came to be regarded with disdain.

The Anglo-Indians were more “Anglo” than “Indian”. Their mother-tongue was English, as was their religious upbringing, their customs, and their traditions. While most of them married within their own Anglo-Indian circle, there were many who

continued to marry expatriate Englishmen. Very few, if any, married Indians. The rigid social barriers that the British erected between themselves and the Anglo-Indians also existed to isolate the Anglo-Indians from the vast majority of Indians.

By and large, neither the British nor the Anglo-Indians made any attempt at appreciating Indian music, art, dance, literature or drama. The “natives” were seen as idol worshippers, and many of their non-Western social habits were frowned upon. The aloofness between themselves and their Indian subjects was of little concern to the British, and even less so now that they were going “home”. But the Anglo-Indians, left in a twilight zone of uncertainty, felt a bitter sense of betrayal and dismay at the fact that Britain made no effort to offer her swarthier sons any hospitality in the land where their forefathers had been born.

Many Anglo-Indians, apprehensive of changes that would surely come with India's independence, chose to leave India. The 1950s and 1960s saw a steady stream of departures as about 150,000 Anglo-Indians, seeking wider horizons and better job prospects, emigrated to Australia, Britain, Canada, the U.S.A. and New Zealand. The exodus has continued through the decades up to the present time—although now, Anglo-Indians, like their Indian contemporaries, leave India not for reasons of uncertainty, but because the West offers a dazzling array of educational and career opportunities.

Much has been written about the Anglo-Indians. Unfortunately, a great deal of this commentary—including novels like *Bhowani Junction* and movies such as *Cotton Mary*—has focussed on stereotyped characters and situations that either oversimplify or exaggerate reality. Anglo-Indian men have been portrayed as feckless idlers; the women as promiscuous sirens.

Over the past few decades, however, doctoral studies in Australia, the U.K., Canada, and the U.S.A. have examined the Anglo-Indian Community (the capital “C” is commonly used to denote Anglo-Indian identity) under a more objective microscope. They point out that the number of notable people within its ranks has been disproportionate to its small size—in the armed services (military, navy and air-force brass), the civil administration, the arena of the arts and entertainment, and in the field of athletics. While Anglo-Indian women once followed the traditional

occupations of nursing, teaching, and secretarial work, they are now active in professional fields: medicine, law, and accountancy. Some have found their niche in social work, or pursue political careers in both state and central government legislative assemblies.

For all that, Anglo-Indians were, and still are, a fun-loving lot. They have always had the capacity to thoroughly enjoy themselves at a dance, a sing-a-long session, a picnic, a party. But the perception that this applies only to Anglo-Indians is outdated. In today's Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi, Indian yuppies gyrate with vigorous abandon on nightclub dance floors. The Anglo-Indian women who were deemed "fast" because their necklines were daringly décolleté, who wore lipstick, smoked, drank, and went out un-chaperoned on dates, now have their counterparts—most of them sophisticated, upper-crust Indian women—in all three cities.

The Anglo-Indian identity will eventually disappear. Those who have found new lives abroad have merged into the mainstream of their adopted countries. In today's India, the Community is indistinguishable from their Hindu and Muslim friends and neighbours. The women wear saris or *salwarkameez*, the kids disco enthusiastically to Hindi film hits and watch Bollywood movies. Although English remains their first language, they speak the local vernacular with ease and fluency.

That said, the Community hasn't sunk into extinction just yet. Electronic communication has dissolved barriers of time and distance, and in the last ten years, Anglo-Indians across the world have displayed a resurgence of pride in their Community's heritage. Old links of friendship have been re-forged, and new links discovered by a post-Independence generation of expatriates searching for their family roots in India. So the flame may continue to burn for a few more generations before flickering out forever.

I am grateful that I was born, grew up, and lived in India, with its enormous diversity of people, languages, religions, and traditions. And I am glad to be part of a culture known for its good cheer, its generous hospitality, and its sportsmanship—qualities which were, and still remain, intrinsic to the Community's ethos.

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