



## THE ROOTS OF ANGLO-INDIAN CULTURAL PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES

Dorothy McMenamin

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During the British period in India Anglo-Indians, together with the British, have been accused of racial prejudice because they rarely chose to marry or even mix socially with native Indians. This raises a puzzling anomaly because to be part of the mixed race community implies some Indian ancestry. It is also surprising that Anglo-Indians tracing their genealogy have usually failed to identify an Indian ancestor. Genealogists suggest this is because Indian women linked their social status to the European father of their children, and adopted a Christian name.[1] This change of Indian name to Christian has camouflaged the maternal lineage. In some instances there is evidence that the Indian heritage was deliberately obscured.[2] What I want to explore is **why** the Indian links amongst the majority of Anglo-Indians were blurred and remained obscure despite mixed marriages occurring for a period of over four hundred years. Then I will look at the impact of these mixed cultural unions upon the fledgling Anglo-Indian community.

### ANGLO-INDIAN GENESIS

What is significant for my argument is that the Eurasian offspring from these unions, now called Anglo-Indians, retained their paternal European culture, and subsequent generations remained essentially endogamous, marrying within the father's group or the ever-growing mixed race population.[3] No doubt some fathers failed to support their progeny who were raised in the Indian fold and we can only speculate about these lives as very little, if anything, is recorded. What we do know is that early in the British period, children recognized as fathered by Europeans were taken from their mothers and placed in special schools, euphemistically called orphanages, although some of these children were in fact abandoned, left at schools and

churches.[4]

The first of these schools was established in Madras in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the fathers reported as being “soldiers and lower order of people” who neglected “their offspring and suffer them to follow the caste of their mothers”.[5] This statement reveals the identity of the parents which this paper will amplify. In 1783 an Orphan Society was formed, and with due respect to British and Indian social hierarchies, here in Calcutta the Upper Orphanage for officers’ children was established, and the Lower Orphanage was for children of lower ranks. [6] The practice of separating children from their mothers has been criticized but it originated in good faith to give neglected mixed-race children the benefit of a formal education.

What is significant for my argument is **why** these children came to be neglected. The answer is perhaps obvious as stated in the above quote: that the Indian women available to lower class European men were poor, and without any means of support. Their children were on the streets or rejected. Certainly upper class Indian women, whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, were unlikely to be accessible to ordinary European males, and herein lies the nub. Initially European males met upper class Indian women with whom they formed semi-permanent relationships or married. These pioneering European males established contacts with influential Indians and were often offered access to harems, some forming their own harems.[7] What becomes clear is the distinct demarcation between upper class mixed liaisons and the liaisons between Indian women and lower class European males, the latter being due to the large influx of British soldiers and adventurers into India after 1780s and post-1857.[8]

#### UPPER CLASS LIAISONS

Many historians including Hawes, Holmes, Brendon, Dalrymple, Gilmore and Kincaid have provided vivid descriptions of early mixed race liaisons at the higher echelons of British and Indian society where the maternal ancestry is identified. Three examples are:

- (1) James Skinner (1778-1841), son of a Scotsman Lt. Col. Hercules Skinner who married the daughter of a Rajput land owner, *zamindar*. James

achieved success setting up Skinner's Horse regiment and had fourteen wives and eighty children.[9]

(2) General Sir David Ochterlony, British Resident in Delhi in 1821 at home with some of his thirteen wives.[10]

(3) James Kirkpatrick, made famous through Dalrymple's *White Mughals*, married Hyderabadi aristocrat Khair un-Nissa.[11]

What became known about these liaisons was that the welfare and fate of the mixed race children caused their parents a constant worry and dilemma.[12] The sons often faced difficulty obtaining good posts, whilst the plight of daughters who were married according to the mother's traditions, worried the fathers as their daughters could be placed into veiled seclusion, *purdah*. Conversely, British practices produced different tragedies. A wife of Skinner committed suicide when her daughter was sent to a British school as she thought Rajput honour had been jeopardised.[13] The salient feature of these higher class liaisons is that the Indian ancestry is known. This was because, as I will explain shortly, the mother's family status was upheld as her marriage was to a high class European.

#### OTHER LIAISONS

In contrast to upper class liaisons, the identity of females in association with ordinary or lower class British males was lost because the mother adopted a Christian name or the children were raised in orphanage schools. Numerous British males took Indian women into their homes as wives or concubines, *bibis*, and it is these women who usually changed their names.[14] This cartoon in Kincaid's account provides a comical slant where instead it is the paternity of the *bibi's* newborn babe which is blurred![15]

Eventually, problems facing the future of mixed-race children appear to have deterred inter-marriages which decreased in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but conversely may have produced more abandoned children. There were very few European women to the proportion of British males, so men continued to find solace in the arms of Indian women, or more often, they married Anglo-Indian women.[16]

These explanations partly answer the puzzling anomaly about Indian ancestral identity. However, it is the circumstances which drove Indian women to either abandon their children or reject their own culture for a Christian identity, that needs further scrutiny. This involves looking at Indian cultures, particularly Muslim and Hindu marriage practices. The impact of these local practices upon British and Anglo-Indian attitudes and behaviour has in the past, I believe, been overlooked and underrated.[17] I shall briefly outline relevant Muslim customs, dominant Hindu practices, and then look at British attitudes.

### MUSLIM PRACTICES

In Muslim society a daughter was usually betrothed at a young age to a Muslim male of appropriate social rank, the only exception being to a male of much higher social standing, as in examples quoted earlier, but certainly not to ordinary British soldiers. Dowries were not paid for marriages to non-Muslims, who were classified as *dhimmis*. In the Islamic realm *dhimmis* were second class citizens with whom marriage was taboo, although occasionally expedient.[18] No Muslim family would consider a non-Muslim an appropriate match for their daughter because great honour, *izzat*, is at stake when selecting a suitable groom. A Muslim woman who consorted with a male outsider, if she survived being scarred or killed by her family, sadly as still reported today, would certainly be ostracized by her own kin. Since there was no respectability available to her children within Muslim society, a mother would shift into the society of the father of her children, whether she formally converted to Christianity or just nominally adopted a Christian name. This provided security and status for her while the children were entitled to education in Anglo-Indian schools.

Muslim practices in India had of course inevitably been influenced by the dominant ancient Indian culture, various forms of Hinduism which was the religion of approximately ninety percent of the population. Muslims remained outsiders, and a minority, having arrived on the subcontinent from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but their influence had attracted large numbers of Indian converts. The majority of conversions came from the lower classes because originally conversion to Islam could gain privilege under Muslim rule, but particularly, it offered escape from low Hindu status.[19] The escape from low status in the pervasive hierarchical Hindu

caste society creates the crux of my argument.

## HINDU PRACTICES

The earliest ancient texts originate from oral traditions claimed to be over 5000 years old. They contain prescriptions for rituals essential for all caste members to perform during their lives. A person is born into their parents' caste which cannot be changed during one lifetime. If caste Hindus do not adhere to the rules pertaining to ritual purity, they become ritually impure and need to undergo specific cleansing rituals to regain their caste status.[20]

These beliefs, duties and associated rituals originate in one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, the Laws of Manu in the Rig Veda. [21] Manu gives the original account of how humanity was created by the mythic sacrifice of the cosmic man Purusha through which the four-fold order of caste/*varna* came into being.[22] From Purusha's mouth came the pious Brahmins, priests at the top of the caste hierarchy deserving utmost respect and revered by other Hindus; the Kshatriya warrior caste derived from Purusha's arms, being kings/*rajas* and warriors whose duty it was to maintain order in the kingdom; third in the hierarchy are the Vaisyas, the merchant caste formed from the lions and responsible for trade and economic success. These three upper castes are considered twice born, the pure castes, who should be served by the fourth and lowest caste born from the feet, Sudras, the serving caste. Within each of these castes are thousands of sub-castes, *jatis*. [23] To maintain this sacred order, strict rules and duties, *varna-ashrama-dharma*, prescribe the behaviour of people from each caste, such as where you worship, what food you eat, who cooks your food, where you live, plus countless rituals and practices associated with daily life within the home and of course death rituals.[24] What is vital to sustain the order is that marriages are arranged whereby daughters are betrothed to sons of an appropriate *jati* so that the daughter's honour and the honour of her family are upheld. The bride's parents pay a dowry for a suitable groom as vividly described in Vikram Seth's acclaimed novel *A Suitable Boy*. Everyone outside the four castes are ritually impure – untouchables or *mlecchas*. [25]

As early as 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Buddhism and Jainism arose in opposition to the caste system.[26] Both retained the Hindu worldview in their cosmologies, albeit with

adaptations, but rejected the oppression of the majority of the population on the basis of birth, i.e. low born or *mlecchas*.<sup>[27]</sup> All foreigners such as Muslims, Parsees and later the Europeans arriving on Indian soil remained outside the Hindu fold because strict marriage practices proscribed inter-marriages with *mlecchas*. Hindus who married or even associated with outsiders would lose their caste status.<sup>[28]</sup>

#### NEW-COMERS TO INDIA *MLECCHAS*

The entrenched caste system and its strict rules of endogamy prevented newcomers from integrating. In response to being ostracized, newcomers maintained their separate customs, built their own places of worship and lived in separate areas. In this way outsiders retained their own social status, whilst at the same time not polluting high caste Hindus by their *mleccha* presence. Even the British formed their own cantonment areas, and here in Calcutta today, there are separate districts, *paras*, for Hindus, Muslims, and Anglo-Indians.

The ideology of caste and ritual purity that are embedded in Hinduism and especially the polluting status of *mlecchas*, excluded those of mixed race from any respectable status in Indian society. Moreover, high caste Indian women who entered relationships with ordinary European men lost their caste status. So the only option available to Indian women who had lost their status, or lower caste women seeking status, was to take on the identity of their male partners and enter the Christian fold in the British communities. For these reasons Anglo-Indians aligned themselves with their paternal cultural heritage because their mixed status was unacceptable, even polluting, to traditional Hindu society.

These cultural traditions which excluded mixed races and Europeans on the basis of being *dhimmis* or *mlecchas*, challenges the idea of racial prejudice by Europeans against Indians. In fact the reverse seems more accurate. However, it is apparent that the term racial prejudice, with all its derogatory implications, does not correctly reflect the conflict between different cultural practices and beliefs which underpin the reasons why different groups or races do not socialize together. Caste is an ancient and deeply hierarchical discriminatory system influencing all Indian practices and attitudes which in turn profoundly affected the culture and attitudes of newcomers into India.

## BRITISH ATTITUDES

Certainly the British brought with them Victorian class attitudes, frequently summed up, simplistically, as snobbery. But snobbery when faced with Hindu notions of caste purity created intense rivalry and challenges – in fact the practices rigidified, trying to outdo one another in the purity stakes. An example is a Brahmin arriving with a servant carrying a bowl of water for his Indian master to wash and purify himself after shaking hands with any British Raj officials. This Brahmanical superiority made an impression on the British arrivals.[29] One response by the British was to establish their own elitist clubs and to further stamp their exclusivity; the clubs barred Indians, except as servants.[30]

This had the additional benefit of retaining and promoting traditional British class practices, according to which lower rank officers, merchant classes and soldiers, were also excluded. Such practices contributed to ICS officers being aligned with the elite Brahmins and referred to as the “heaven born”. [31] The lower ranks and Anglo-Indians had little option but to follow suit and establish their own clubs.[32] These practices permeated British colonial society and engendered what have been perceived as pretentious, elitist and insular attitudes by Anglo-Indians.[33]

## ANGLO-INDIAN PRACTICES

It is important not to forget that another reason for establishing their own clubs was the different cultural behaviour of the British and Anglo-Indians. Clubs were places where European women could openly socialize with men, a practice taboo for Indian women. European and Anglo-Indian men and women socializing and eating together at clubs, especially unmarried couples dancing in each other’s arms, was a complete anathema to traditional Hindus and Muslims. Women who behaved in such a manner with Indian men would have been perceived as wanton or even prostitutes. Islam prescribed that women should be veiled, observe purdah, and traditional Hindus although not as strict as in Islam, often advocated public veiling for their women, but neither would have allowed their women to socialize in public with males outside the family. Although there have always been exceptions, during the colonial period these were insufficient to change the normative codes of Hindu and Muslim behaviour and practices. British and Anglo-Indian women therefore avoided Indian

male company for reasons resulting from custom and culture, rather than simply due to racial prejudice.

The perceived lower status of women within Hinduism and Islam, where veiling was observed and harems acceptable, was another cultural reason that deterred Anglo-Indian women from marrying Indian men. These cultural differences perhaps contributed towards racial prejudice, and this paper is not intended to deny that forms of racial and colour prejudice existed within British and Indian society.[34] My focus has been to draw attention to traditional Hindu and Muslim practices that impacted on the embryonic mixed race community, forming the roots and moulding Anglo-Indian insular behaviour and attitudes.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Caste was legally abolished by the Indian constitution in 1948 soon after India became independent, and it is interesting to read in anthropological works since the 1990s that *gradually* it is becoming more acceptable for Anglo-Indians and Indians to inter-marry.[35] These reports nevertheless affirm that endogamy remains the norm for caste Hindus, Muslims and Anglo-Indians, explicitly demonstrating just how deeply embedded caste attitudes were and remain even today.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that Anglo-Indians developed a cultural identity that was Christian, mother tongue English and dress style Western. These were symbols that distinguished Anglo Indians from the surrounding Indian cultures and provided status for Anglo-Indians in British India. Western dress for women was a tacit sign that allowed them to remain unveiled often unescorted in public without evoking a corresponding loss of status. A positive outcome of this Anglo-Indian culture has been that when the majority of the population in India migrated to the west after independence, they were able to integrate easily into western society.

***Dorothy McMenamin*** holds an MA in history and specializes in modern South Asian history and religions. She has lectured on associated topics at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and is a freelance oral historian. Her research interests focus on trans-national identities, especially migrants from South Asia to New Zealand. Projects and publications encompass the cultural identities of Anglo-Indian societies in British India and New Zealand, as well as migrants and refugees from

*the Indian subcontinent into New Zealand.*

*Dorothy was commissioned by Oxford University from 2004-2006 to record oral histories regarding the life experiences of leprosy sufferers in the South Pacific region. In 2009 she completed a Masters thesis which has been adapted for general publication by McFarland Publishers, due out in 2011. The book is viewable on listings at [www.mcfarlandpub.com](http://www.mcfarlandpub.com) Dorothy McMenamin can be contacted at [dorothym@inet.net.nz](mailto:dorothym@inet.net.nz)*

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#### NOTES

[1] Geraldine Charles, "Anglo-Indian ancestry" in *Genealogists' Magazine*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 107-8.

[2] Vyvyan Brendon, *Children of the Raj*, London, Phoenix, 2005, pp. 41-43.

[3] Lionel Caplan, *Children of colonialism: Anglo-Indians in a postcolonial world*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2001, pp. 1-6 and Frank Anthony *Britain's Betrayal in India*, Bombay, Allied Press, 1969.

[4] Brendon, pp. 43-44.

[5] Christopher Hawes, *Poor Relations: The making of a Eurasian community in British India 1773-1833*, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1996, p. 12.

[6] Brendon, p. 44 and Hawes pp. 23-25 and 47.

[7] William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and betrayal in eighteenth century India*, London, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2002, pp. 30-32.

[8] Hawes, pp. ix and 8.

[9] Hawes, pp. 100-1.

[10] Dalrymple, pp 116-7.

[11] Illustrations in Dalrymple, passim pp. 116-7 and 276-7.

[12] Brendon, pp. 47-55.

[13] Brendon, p. 48.

[14] Hawes, p. 14.

[15] Charles Kincaid and son Dennis were British ICS officials. Dennis Kincaid, *British social life in India 1608-1937*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 90.

[16] Hawes, pp. 18-19.

[17] Traditional attitudes have been examined to a greater extent in relation to the Raj, but not Anglo-Indians. Even Lionel Caplan in *Children of colonialism*, pp. 1-37 omits examining traditional practices with only a brief mention of caste in his article "Cupid in colonial and post-colonial South India: Changing 'marriage' practices among Anglo-Indians in Madras" *South Asia*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, 1998.

[18] During the great Mughal period such marriages of expediency were arranged, see Bamber Gascoigne, *The great Moghuls*, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1971, pp. 116 and 227.

[19] Romila Thapar, *A history of India Vol. I*, London, Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 278-9.

[20] Thapar, pp. 60, 150 and 289.

[21] Thapar, pp. 30-40, see also *The Law Code of Manu*, translated by Patrick Olivelle, Oxford University Press, 2004.

[22] A. L. Basham, *The wonder that was India*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1969, pp. 242-3

[23] Thapar, pp. 38-40.

[24] Basham, pp. 159-171.

[25] John Keay, *India: A history* London, Harper Perennial, 2004, pp. 24, 52-4, 59, 187-8.

[26] Rupert Gethin *The foundations of Buddhism* Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 12-13.

[27] Amartya Sen, *The argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian culture, history and identity*, London, Penguin Books, 2005, p.10

[28] Thapar, p. 184.

[29] David Gilmour, *The ruling caste: Imperial lives in the Victorian Raj*, London, John Murray (Publishers), 2005, p. 257.

[30] Gilmour, esp. pp, 229-240.

[31] Dorothy McMenamin, "Identifying Domiciled Europeans in colonial India: Poor Whites or Privileged community? In *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, June 2001, pp. 118, and also in Richard Holmes, *The British Soldier in India*, London, Harper Perennial, 2006, p. 84.

[32] McMenamin, pp. 113-19.

[33] Blair Williams describes the Anglo-Indian community as insular in "Insularity and Elitism" in *The way we were*, New Jersey, CTR Inc. Publishing, 2006, pp. 200-6

[34] These prejudices have been canvassed within a limited framework in McMenamin pp. 121-2.

[35] Caplan, "Cupid", pp. 8-11.