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FOOD AND LANGUAGE AS MARKERS OF IDENTITY:  
THE ANGLO-INDIAN COMMUNITY'S SURVIVAL SINCE PARTITION

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other mixed races – for instance, the Burghers of Ceylon or the Eurasians of Singapore – that have faded since the years of colonial rule, the Anglo-Indians – mixed race Eurasians born of the British Raj-, both in India and abroad, have survived since Indian Independence as a distinct community. They are an ethnicity that is growing, reviving even, rather than dying.[1] Their distinctive cuisine and manner of speaking is central to this survival and identity.

As Mugglestone points out, from the eighteenth century on, accent came to be an important marker of class and identity.[2] It is not surprising, then, that this English “national obsession”, made the Anglo-Indian accent central to how they were perceived and also to how they saw themselves. Meanwhile, as Anderson writes, food often “conveys messages about group identification”. [3] It makes sense that Anglo-Indian cuisine too, was important to their identity.

Further, our sense of taste can often help to bring back a certain time or place.[4] The same can be said of certain words or phrases. The survival of the Anglo-Indian community from the moment of Partition illustrates this. Their distinctive cuisine and manner of speaking has helped to create a unique culture and identity that has helped prevent the community's extinction. For example, Anglo-Indians in India still speak English as a first language and communities exist which hold on to Scottish and English food traditions such as meatloaf and sago pudding.[5] Meanwhile, Anglo-Indian immigrants in the West still use Hindi and Persian-derived words in

their speech (at least when amongst family or community), recall snacks such as “rosa cookies” and “kul-kuls” with fondness, and often have spicy curry and basmati rice as their most frequent cuisine at home.

When the British left India, the Anglo-Indians were left in an unenviable position: Europeans largely saw them as inferior, dubbing them “half-castes” while Indians mistrusted and often hated them for their Western-oriented ways and because of the role they had consistently played in helping British colonial rule.[6] Experiencing such insecurity, and being a minority group, thousands of Anglo-Indians left India for the West. They moved to England, Australia, New Zealand and Canada – all places that would provide more opportunity and in which they felt they would better belong.

Yet today, over half a century after Partition, these immigrants and their offspring have not been absorbed into the various societies they moved to. Rather, a strong Anglo-Indian community exists, with reunions held around the world, journals published, and memoirs written. Similarly for those who remained in India: while some of the one hundred and fifty thousand who stayed on integrated well into upper class Indian Hindu society, the majority, mainly poor, held fast to memories of past Anglo-Indian glories and to the concept of “Home” – England, where they really belonged.[7] The culinary habits of the community as well as their manner of speech were central to this survival.

The following quote - of an Anglo-Indian immigrant answering a white British man’s question as to where she had come from - is illustrative of the salience of these two markers of identity:

I said, “I’m from India.” He said “How come you speak such good English?” I said, “Well English is my mother tongue, I dress like the English dress, I eat... the same food, maybe a little more rice and curry... We eat, we sit at tables and eat from plates, and use cutlery and crockery.”...Everything is so English... but we haven’t got that accent, you see? We don’t have the accent, the English accent.”[8]

A distinctive cuisine and language contributed to a strong group identity, recognized from within as well as outside of the Anglo-Indian community: Anglo-Indians questioned about their food habits or accent could only reply by explaining their entire identity – what did it mean to be “Anglo-Indian”?

Indeed, what does it mean? After the East India Company arrived in India, more and more mixed race children were born. In fact, alliances between British soldiers and Indian women were condoned.[9] However, the Eurasian children that resulted did not immediately form a community: until the nineteenth century, most were simply individuals that lived in the worlds of either their Indian mothers or (more often) their English fathers. This changed; by 1800, the British were increasingly disapproving of cohabitation with native women and concerned with racial purity.[10] Rejected by their British fathers, Eurasians were forced into a community of their own. Largely endogamous, they became a separate ethnicity with a unique collective memory strongly shaped by accent, language and cuisine.

This paper argues that the cuisine and language patterns of the Anglo-Indian community at the moment of Partition were crucial to its continuance as a distinct minority in India as well as abroad. With British colonial rule gone, the Anglo-Indian community was in danger of becoming less clearly defined - there was no longer British society to appeal to for job and education privileges and to aspire and relate to culturally. In India, to maintain their separate status, English food and language and the unique Anglo-Indian accent was, and continues to be, stressed; conversely, abroad, curry is highlighted as central to the Anglo-Indian identity along with knowledge of certain Hindi or other Indian-language words.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Anglo-Indians are barely present in histories of modern India or in anthropological research.[11] Perhaps this is because Eurasian poverty was such a “public feature of the community”, shameful to the British Raj that was responsible for their existence and difficult to fit into traditional British imperial narratives.[12] Mixed populations, however, should invite scholarly research because they straddle the line marking colonizer from colonized. This is particularly true in light of recent attempts to “revisit the colonial record, push at the edges, unsettle the calmness with which colonial categories and knowledges were instituted as the facts of history”. [13]

Most books on the Anglo-Indians are broad surveys of the community, covering its development in the face of rising British racism from the late eighteenth century on and ending with the emigration that occurred at and beyond Indian Independence.

Varma's (1979) "Anglo-Indians" is such a book; first describing its formation, he explores the education, social life and economic position of the community. Gaikwad (1967) and Abel (1988) have offered similarly broad overviews as have the prominent Eurasians H.A. Stark (1936) and Frank Anthony (1969). While, Gist and Wright (1973) and Hawes' (1996) works are more focused, studying the concept of marginality and covering a defined time period respectively, what remains evident is that studies of the more specific aspects of the community are scarce; cuisine and language are two important facets of the Anglo-Indian identity that deserve more attention.

In addition to these and other general works, the community has often been studied as the "Anglo-Indian Problem".[14] Bhattacharya, for instance looks at the "serious problem of adjustment on the part of the Anglo-Indians"[15] while Lobo has sought to explain Anglo-Indian poverty in India by looking at the history of their education.[16]

However, this is not to say that discourses on identity – and in particular, on Anglo-Indian food habits and language patterns – do not exist. Work on this topic has and continues to be written. For example, Bhattacharya's study touches upon the food habits of the Anglo-Indians and also their language patterns and migration while Gist has a section on food behavior in his paper on inter-group relations.[17] An article by Caplan has a similar section entitled "custards and curries".[18] Nonetheless, each discussion is limited to less than a page; again, these aspects, so integral to identity, clearly deserve more study.

Collingham's references to the changing culinary habits of the British Raj are useful in this respect. As she writes, "Britishness took on a distinctive character of its own... a preference for British vegetables combined with a continued love of curry".[19] She also points out the disdain for Indian languages that was prevalent among the British in India by the nineteenth century. Her descriptions are instructive as they were reflected in the Anglo-Indian community. For instance, Anglo-Indian women often used the same household guides and cookbooks as British memsahibs and among Anglo-Indians too there was a strong tendency to refuse to learn Indian languages.[20] However, her focus is solely on the British in India rather than the Eurasian community. Again it is clear that food and language as aspects of the Anglo-Indian identity are still areas in which much has yet to be explored.

More than food, the Anglo-Indian accent has received scholarly attention in recent years. Coelho's study of the speech of the Anglo-Indians in Madras for instance, shows that it is a distinct variety of Indian English, differing from what he refers to as "General" or "Educated" Indian English.[21] Further, Wells dedicates a section of his "Accents of the English" to the Anglo-Indian accent, "known derogatively as a chee-chee accent", alone.[22] However, these remain linguistic studies; the "chee-chee" accent has yet to be studied in depth in terms of its importance to the Anglo-Indian identity. But it is an important factor; it is mentioned countless times in works of fiction and it surfaces again and again in interviews with Anglo-Indians and in memoirs.[23]

Thus far, Blunt's work, via her interviews with Anglo-Indian women, has delved deepest into this topic; she looks at several aspects of the Anglo-Indian identity, and within this, especially at Independence, food and language come to fore. With respect to food, she writes: "Explaining how their home life differed from Indian home life before Independence, many of my interviewees focused on what, and how, they ate". In general, many emphasized how English their eating customs were, showing how tied they felt their identities were to the British. This was true of language too. "English... was an important way for Anglo-Indians to identify with the British.". However, as Blunt points out, a unique accent - different from the English one - evolved; "...a 'chi-chi' or 'dirty' accent identified them as domiciled in India rather than born in Britain".[24]

Methodologically, this paper will further explore food and language as aspects of the community's identity by looking at memoirs, interviews and newspaper articles focused around the time of Partition. These resources were found at the Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library in London and in recently published memoirs by Anglo-Indians reminiscing about their experiences around the moment of Independence. It is divided into two sections. Chapter One analyses the centrality of food to the continuance of the Anglo-Indian identity both in India and abroad while Chapter Two will look at language in the same manner. A comparison to other mixed race communities and a brief survey of the history of the community with respect to food and language will be mentioned in the Conclusion.

## CHAPTER ONE: FOOD HABITS

As the anthropologist Anderson points out, “foodways are powerfully structured by considerations of personal and group identity”.<sup>[25]</sup> The experience of the Anglo-Indian Community provides an excellent instance of this; Eastern and Western cuisine is blended much in the way that blood intermingled centuries earlier to give birth to the Eurasians of the subcontinent. Interviews with India’s Anglo-Indians along with memoirs of Anglo-Indian immigrants indicate that culinary habits are central to their group identity. These memories date back to Partition when the changes India was undergoing threatened to make the Community extinct.

At Indian Independence, Anglo-Indians tried their best to immigrate. “It is not surprising that there is much discussion and no little anxiety among Anglo-Indians regarding their future. We are convinced that it is not generally realized what large numbers of the community are leaving India to settle down in England and in other parts of the British Empire”.<sup>[26]</sup> The community was dispersing to various Commonwealth countries and many feared it would no longer exist.

As one immigrant recalls,

After the British left, things familiar to us started going downhill. There was no respect for Anglo-Indian women. Companies were taken over and nationalized and we were afraid ... our children would be forced to learn and speak in Hindi and forsake everything British... those who could afford it left the country.<sup>[27]</sup>

Another immigrant, Leslie Middlemiss, recalls,

As far as I can remember, all Anglo-Indians wanted to get out of India if they could.<sup>[28]</sup>

It was also probable that those left behind, with their depleted numbers and poverty would be absorbed into wider Indian society.

This, however, did not happen. Rather, the Anglo-Indian Community clung to its British roots. “I was born an Anglo-Indian and my heritage from my far removed Indian forbearer was the olive hue of my skin; but there my Indian heritage ceased, for I was taught the language of the Englishman, his manners, his tastes...”<sup>[29]</sup> As the prospect of Independence grew and in response to Gandhi’s advice to the

Community to “cast in your lot with the masses of India”, the general Anglo-Indian reply is best captured in the comment “Oh, Mahatma Gandhi... I ask you... can the Oak become a peepul?”[30][31] For those who stayed on, the thought of integrating into India, of becoming more Indian than British, was not seriously considered despite the requests by some of the community leaders to do so.[32] Claims such as “Anglo-Indians are as much for the greatness and freedom of India, our home and motherland, as any other community” rang false in the face of the waves of Anglo-Indians attempting to leave India at independence and in the decades that followed.[33]

This Anglo-Indian cultural affinity and connection to England comes across clearly in several aspects of the Community’s cuisine. In the memoirs of numerous Anglo-Indian immigrants, for example, recollections of Christmas cake are made. As Paul Connerton has written, images of the past are “conveyed and sustained by ritual performances”; this is true with respect to Anglo-Indian memories of Christmas.[34] “Christmas week was a special occasion...The Italian bakery in Ahmadabad would make beautiful Christmas cakes...”[35] In another example, Deefholts in her book on the Anglo-Indian railway communities of India notes, “Anglo-Indian railway communities celebrated Christmas in their own inimitable fashion... Christmas cake making was a ritual”.[36]

In a separate book of Anglo-Indian memoirs, the Canadian immigrant, Dolores Chew, writes of her Calcutta childhood as defined by Christmas cake; she has passed on her memories and tradition of baking to her children and sees the process as part of her Anglo-Indian identity.

...each year, to honor the memory of those cakes of my childhood and all the beloved people who were involved in the process – and to reinvent this tradition for my children – I make a batch of cakes... Now my children see the preparation and sharing of fruit-cake as an essential part of their Christmas tradition.[37]

Connie Roberts records similar memories of Christmas in India linked to food. “Christmas was a big occasion in India...Christmas food was also very special with varieties of fudge, marzipan and other savory eats”.

She too, mentions cake. Christmas and its source, Christianity, were strong factors in the cultural ties that Anglo-Indians felt to Britain; food traditions at Christmas – in

particular, the baking of Christmas cakes - were a significant part of the Anglo-Indian identity in the years before Partition. These memories and continued traditions both in India and abroad contribute to the continued Anglo-Indian communal identity today.

English cuisine in general has remained important to the community's identity in India. Timms' interview with Bridget White-Kumar, the author of five Anglo-Indian recipe books, illustrates this continued importance. "At first glance, Bangalore, the home of modern India's IT miracle, is a city that more than any other has freed itself from every trace of the Raj. Yet I found a community that has held on to many Scottish and English food traditions and used them to carve out its own identity." [38] As she explains, the Anglo-Indian Community in Bangalore today is "proudly Indian" but "identifies closely with Scottish and English traditions and food". Mince and tatties, Mrs White-Kumar explains, is what her family has "when I can't think of anything else to make"; as Timms points out, nothing could be more English than this. These English food traditions are a key marker of the Anglo-Indian communal identity in India today.

What makes Anglo-Indian cuisine unique is that these English dishes are mixed with Indian ones. Bridget, Timms' article states, owns several old recipe books, including "a rare 1874 edition of the Madras Cookery Book, written anonymously by "an English Resident's wife". [39] The 1922 copy of this book at the British Library is instructive. The "Old Lady Resident" mixes English dishes such as "Brighton Pudding" and "Victoria Sandwiches" with recipes like "Fish Curry". Meanwhile, the layout of the book – with each recipe printed in English and in Tamil – is reflective of the mixed origins of the food. [40]

While some of the recipes are English dishes and some are purely Indian, others are a combination of both cultures and arise specifically from the Anglo-Indian experience. Bridget's recipe for "Railway Mutton Curry" is such an example. The dish is "a direct throw back to the days of the British Raj... This slightly tangy dish was served in Railway Refreshment Rooms and on long distance trains, with Bread or Dinner Rolls. The curry was not too pungent keeping in mind the delicate palates of the British." [41] Along with relating to the British experience in India, the dish relates to Anglo-Indians: the Anglicized curry was "popular with the Railway staff who had to

be on duty for long periods at a stretch”, and India’s Eurasians were associated more than any other community with the British-Indian rail.[42][43]

More generally, there exist numerous cookbooks and household guides from nineteenth and twentieth century British India that mix British dishes with Indian ones. “Indian Cookery’ by an Anglo-Indian” is one such example. While it is not clear whether this book was written by a person of mixed race descent or simply by a British person living in India, advertisements in the Anglo-Indian Journal indicate that members of the community were part of its intended market for sales.[44] Once again, Christmas is definitive and recipes are given for dishes such as “Christmas Mince Pies” and “Christmas Mince Meat”. [45]

The recipes it contains for beef and pork curry also shed light on another distinguishing feature of the Community – not Hindu or Muslim, the Anglo-Indians, like the British, ate both these meats. As Blunt points out, this practice, along with the Anglo-Indian manner of eating – with cutlery rather than with their hands – was a way to mark themselves out as different from other Indians. As one member of the community in Lucknow states, “I won’t sit down to a meal without serviettes, and I cannot eat with my hands, I cannot. I’ve been brought up that way”. [46]

Lewin’s study on skin color shows that this Anglo-Indian affinity for their British heritage was in fact strong aspiration. “In many ways the Anglo-Indian community in India always tried to associate with the British side”; thus, the community “ate a lot of English food at home”. [47] Further, Orwell spoke of their “pretention to being Europeans” and Hobson, an Anglo-Indian himself, wrote “we cringe and fawn to the European wherever we go”. [48] [49]

This aspiration to be English comes across clearly in the article “How our children should be brought up” via a discussion on mealtimes.[50] “The severe clock-like regularity of the small English home contrasts strongly with the confusion of the large Indian home in which times of rising and retiring and meal times vary widely, and relatives and friends are constantly appearing, staying for longer or shorter periods and vanishing again”. This, the author of the article feels, is not to the community’s benefit. While he does not advocate “slavishly” copying the English style of living, he does state that there are features about the English home – mealtimes inclusive -

that should be emulated; as he states, they “make for better training of the child for leadership later in life”.<sup>[51]</sup>

However, the article also implies that in terms of hospitality, Anglo-Indians tended to veer to the side of their Indian ancestors. “Hospitality is not practiced on anything like this scale in England...”<sup>[52]</sup> This hospitality and “open-house” mentality became a feature in the identity of Anglo-Indian immigrants abroad.<sup>[53]</sup> As one of Blunt’s interviewees has stated, “Anglo-Indians will make time, you can sort of turn up and stay for as long as you want and you’ll never be thrown out”.<sup>[54]</sup> She goes on to state that when she moved to England, her English friends found it “wonderful that they could come at any time and stay for as long as they wanted, and they knew they’d be fed and made welcome”.<sup>[55]</sup> Again, the mixing of cultures so definitive to the Anglo-Indian identity is evident via food – striving for stricter mealtimes was British while opening one’s house and sharing food anytime was clearly Indian.

In addition to being warmer than and not as restricted as the English in terms of mealtime and household hospitality, Indian dishes came to be a definitive part of the Anglo-Indian community abroad. Nancy Rixon Lilly’s article, “The Cooking Lesson” in the anthology “*The Way We Were*” illustrates this point. Set in Virginia, her story is about an Anglo-Indian woman who passes on her cooking skills to her daughter. For this woman, teaching her daughter the Indian words for various spices and kitchen utensils along with how to cook curry and rice and *aloo bhajee* was a way of passing on her Anglo-Indian roots. The daughter, for instance, learns what a “dooley” is – “it has three shelves and is used to hold fresh or cooked food”.<sup>[56]</sup> The story ends with a call from the woman’s older son: “Hey Mom, it’s me. How do you make *aloo bhajee*?”<sup>[57]</sup> Indian food, then, seems to define Anglo-Indian immigrants and their offspring. This is similar to way that English food defines the community in India – as shown above with the instance of Bridget White-Kumar and her mince and tatties.

Indeed, the memoirs included in “The Anglo-Australian Story” show the significance of Indian food items to the memory of first generation Anglo-Indians; their identities are intimately tied to their recollections of the Indian meals they had eaten before leaving India. Middlemiss remembers that “Sunday was always a good day, because we had yellow rice and kofta curry” while Yvonne Hodgson-Williams remembers kulkuls (sweet puffs similar to doughnuts) and rose cookies as an important part of

her Christmases in India.

For those who emigrated, then, the “Indian” part of “Anglo-Indian” became central to identity. This was a big change from the time of Partition and the Anglo-Indian attitudes that had been prevalent. “We were always brought up to believe that the British were the ‘be all and end all’. Now I realize that the British did nothing for the Anglo-Indians. I am very proud of my Indian heritage.”[58] The converse seems true of the Anglo-Indian communities of India today where, as noted, English meals derive similar pride. Either way, it is clear that food has played a central role in the continued existence of an Anglo-Indian communal identity.

Finally, in looking at Anglo-Indian culinary habits, it must be asked – was their cuisine really unique? As Collingham points out, Britain’s citizens in India mixed Indian and British food too; they ate curry and rice and special cookbooks were written to incorporate aspects of Indian cuisine. However, a manual meant for “persons about to reside in India” notes, “an Indian cook’s idea of curry is very different from that of an English cook’s”. [59] Was, then, the Anglo-Indian curry different yet again?

While Anglo-Indians were many times accused of aping Europeans, and even discussed this tendency as a problem amongst themselves, the Anglo-Indian identity and the food culture it involved was, and is, most certainly unique.[60] As one Anglo-Indian has noted,

Nothing is more wrong or angers me more than to hear people say that we ‘imitated the British’. Culture is handed down to you from your parents... The customs of our Indian neighbors were not ours, but we loved their food, and we sometimes tried their herbal remedies...[61]

This attitude differed from the British one. Wyvern, in his “Culinary Jottings” (1878), notes of British-Indian “dinners of to-day”: “quality has superseded quantity, and the molten curries and florid oriental compositions of the olden time – so fearfully and wonderfully made – have gradually been banished from our dinner tables”. [62] He points out that “although a well-considered curry, or *mulligatawny* – capital things in their way – are still given at breakfast or luncheon, they no longer occupy a position... in the... new *regime*.”[63] This British trend was not mirrored in the curries of the Anglo-Indian community; they, as the 1918-19 Calcutta Domiciled Community

Enquiry Committee points out, often partook in “spiced food” and as noted above, many Anglo-Indians “loved” Indian food.

That the Anglo-Indian way of life was distinct comes across in other aspects of their food. Moore finds that “there were usually three prices in the bazaars, one for the cook shopping for the sahib, one for the cook shopping for himself and one for the Anglo-Indian shopping.”[64] Distinct Anglo-Indian food habits reflected their unique identity, and this was recognized by the merchants who sold them groceries.

To summarize, food forms an important part of the experience of society; it is integral to identity. Britain’s experience as a colonial power in India, for instance, has resulted in an England that, at present, has curry as its “national dish”. Meanwhile, the Anglo-Indian community today owes its strong communal identity in part to food traditions (continued and remembered) that were central to the community before Partition. For Anglo-Indians still in India, English dishes – particularly those that were popular in the days of the British Raj - are what make Anglo-Indian food distinct and representative of identity. For those who immigrated to the West, however, Indian food habits are an important marker of their Anglo-Indian heritage.

(Editor’s note: Part II of this article will appear in the next issue of the IJAIS and deals with the Anglo Indian accent.)

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## NOTES

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