



THEY STAYED BACK – PART 1

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PREAMBLE

Reams have been written about the Anglo-Indians in India, most of it by the Diaspora. None of these deal in depth with the Anglo-Indians who continue to live in the country, mostly out of choice. As few attempts have been made by people like Blair William (who lives and writes out of the U.S), Roy Dean Wright (again, from Iowa, in the U.S) and to a lesser extent by Margaret Deefholts, Lionel Caplan and a host of other scholars from outside the community.

The writings of the Community have been mostly been produced by the diaspora, heavy on nostalgia (for good reasons) and laced with regret (for even better reasons) on having left behind a life-style that can never be recreated in their adopted countries and God knows this is not from a lack of serious effort.

For those who have stayed back however, the journey has not been easy. From having to deal with a multitude of prejudices, partly misguided but mostly well deserved, to outright social ostracism; from having to endure everyday barbs (How come you haven't gone "home" ?) to blatant discrimination in the job market (Well, well, the lad's mother-tongue is English, delivered with tone-in-the-cheek sarcasm). You name it, they have faced it - and survived!

This is the beginning of a piece of research that is on-going and will take time, as it requires travelling all over India, meeting and talking to Anglo-Indians of greatly different persuasions: the well-to-do, and the poverty-stricken, the ones who have married out, the ones who are still trying to immigrate as well as the unfortunate elderly living in old-age homes deserted by the same diaspora that feels pity for

them. It will also include Anglo-Indians as diverse as the entrepreneurs, the school teachers, the call-centre employees and the deep-sea divers.

This then is an account of the trials and travails of those who stayed back, and will be told in 3 or 4 installments, since there is far too much to be encapsulated in just one brief article.

The point of departure for this article has to be the assertion that the Anglo-Indians who now reside in India are primarily the members of the community that decided to stay on in India rather than migrate. They are here out of choice; the overwhelming majority of them did not, at any time, even contemplate migration to western shores. Those who still hanker to leave are the odd remaining relatives of large families that have made Australia, New Zealand or Canada their homes over the last 5 decades. These Anglo-Indians left India in 3 or 4 distinct waves; one that preceded the British leaving India, another that followed their departure and a third wave that took place after Australia watered down its “White Only” policy of the 1960’s, to include (among others) the Anglo Indian community.

Australian Immigration Authorities, backed by the Governments of the day and under fire for their discriminatory policy at a time when the country was attempting to redefine its role as an Asian nation (albeit essentially western by origin) began to look around and rediscovered the Anglo-Indian community. There were after all, earlier largish groups of Anglo-Indians who reached Australian shores in the first half of the century, mostly into cities like Perth and Brisbane.

There were good reasons why the Australian Government’s eyes began to rest on this mixed race community from a neighboring Asian country. A sparsely populated but increasingly prosperous Australia was hard-pressed to find a sufficient number of white people to man its burgeoning infrastructural expansion; its ports, its railways and its mushrooming factories. This need for what was essentially a skilled, blue-collar work-force was initially being met by West European & East European countries. These countries, faced by a paucity of its own skilled work-force, began to enforce restrictions on this “brawn drain”, leading to a vacuum in Australia.

The Anglo-Indian living in India presented itself as an ideal solution. Here was a community with a distinct westernized culture, totally Christian, English speaking, with European surnames. More importantly, the vast majority of this community had precisely the blue-collar credentials that were prized by the Australian Government, who also realized that this community would give itself easily to cultural assimilation into a predominantly white, western population. Australia thus became the 'promised land' for thousands of Anglo-Indians, marginalized by the departure of the British. The British had been dependent on Anglo-Indians and granted them favored status when it came to appointment to jobs in crucial sectors like the Railways, Ports, Telegraph and Nursing. Many of the community were also skilled workers on factory shop-floors as also teachers in schools, both of these again filling the desired profile of the potential Australian immigrant. The stage was thus set for three decades of mass migration from India, further depleting the ranks of an already miniscule minority community.

This brings up a crucial factor, generally overlooked when analyzing the Anglo-Indian Community; the existence of the "Other Anglo-Indian". These "other Anglo-Indians" were around in sizeable numbers, mostly in the big cities of Calcutta, Madras, Bangalore and Bombay. They were non-Railway Colony Anglo-Indians who to a large extent were non-insular and therefore more open to mixing with other Indian communities. They were spread across a broad spectrum of professions and avocations. A good many of them were teachers, principals of schools, customs officials, in the police force. Certainly many of them entered the Defense Services where they made a mark for themselves.

They were also spread out across the big cities and favored middle-class neighborhoods. In Madras, in a neighborhood call San Thome, for instance, more than a hundred Anglo-Indian families lived at one time, cheek by jowl with Hindus in neighboring Mylapore, the bastion of the Tamil Brahmins. These Anglo Indians very often had Hindu neighbors, whom they freely associated with. Their ranks included doctors, principals of schools, teachers in schools, a large number of police officers and engineers. What set them apart from their Anglo-Indian brethren from the Railway Colonies was the fact that they were all graduates or post-graduates unlike the Anglo-Indians in the Railway Colonies who generally did not believe in higher

education and encouraged their children to get a job straight after school.

The hall-mark of both groups of Anglo-Indians however, was a reputation for diligence, uprightness and non-corrupibility, all qualities grudgingly admitted to by the rest of the Indians. Where then did the perception of Anglo-Indians essentially being a fun-loving, guitar-playing, fox-trotting, girl-chasing community get currency ?

Unlike the Luso-Indians of Goa who had a reputation for partying and drinking hard, the Anglo-Indians both partied hard and worked hard. While the working hard was not usually visible to the general public, their propensity for partying, was. The Socials, Dances, Jam-Sessions and Balls became the public face of the community, presented to the others living around them. What was not easily perceived was that those partying on a week-end would very likely have spent the entire week as foremen, for example pm Railway Engines, as indeed many of them did; a back-breaking, sweat-producing job if ever there was one.

However, it was this stereo-type of the Anglo-Indian that those who stayed back had to face and fight through the 1970's and 1980's. The second stereo-type that had to be constantly faced, was that Anglo-Indians lived dated, cloistered and insular lives in the Railway Colonies. They seemed to live in a time-wrap. They were looked upon (in the words of Alvin Toffler) as a 'slow-change Society'.

Those who continued to live in India began to have more in common with their non-Anglo-Indian neighbors. Assimilation became the key operational process, and higher-education the differentiator. Assimilation with the increasingly heterogeneous "Indian Society" was an inexorable process that over-took the Anglo-Indians living in India. Hybridity (mixed breeds) itself is no more attached to a stigma. This early process of assimilation began much earlier when naturally progressing friendships between Anglo-Indian girls and men of other communities prospered in corporate offices all over the country. Since there were very few Anglo-Indian men working in corporate India, the Anglo-Indian women were thrown together with young successful Hindu and Muslim managers & officers educated in good public or hill Schools, with post-graduate degrees. This resulted in many of the Community girls marrying out.

Here again the Anglo-Indian sense of superiority as perceived within the community was at total variance with the perception of the community by those outside. This gave rise to a third stereotype that Anglo-Indian women had to contend with: that of the predatory Anglo-Indian girl out to ensnare well-off Hindu men by any means. This view was not very far from Nirad Chauduri's obnoxious description of Anglo-Indian women as "...unstable, promiscuous, degenerate women".

There is another aspect to this widespread occurrence among Anglo-Indian women living in India. Cheryl Shivan, herself an Anglo-Indian who has married out, says, "...the marrying out of A.I women is not viewed approvingly by many sections of the community today. This loss of well educated Anglo-Indian women is bemoaned since their children do not technically become Anglo-Indian (Caplan). Indeed, to many social commentators the Anglo-Indian in India is an endangered species, this phenomenon seen as being caused by inter-marriage, mass dispersion and the near-total extinction of its natural habitat, the Anglo-Indian railway colony.

Assimilation of Anglo-Indians into the Indian mainstream in today's India can be effortless. The socio-cultural markers which in earlier days set the Anglo-Indians apart from their native neighbors – language, music and dress are no more the exclusive preserve of the Anglo-Indian community. English has long since become the lingua franca of middle and upper middle class India. Large sections of Indian society (especially the younger generation) have embraced western music. In fact, the profusion of western rock groups, and jazz musicians contain nary an Anglo-Indian member. As for dress - it is quite common to see large numbers of Indian girls in western style dresses while their Anglo-Indian counterparts prefer typically Indian outfits like the sari and the salwar kameez.

Dr. Lionel Caplan states, "Today's educated and successful Anglo-Indian has begun increasingly to associate with and regard themselves as part of a cosmopolitan but Indian ambience. They have little reason to leave India though most can afford to visit foreign places".

Indeed many do regularly visit Australia, New Zealand and Canada where large

Anglo-Indian beachheads have been established, spending a few weeks in diasporic homes (where incidentally the predominant cuisine is either North Indian or South Indian, depending on their places of origin). They are, however, more than happy to return home to India, convinced that they have the better deal. Talk to Anglo-Indians who live in India and they will tell you life in India offers more time for leisure and recreation. Any day of the week is dropping-in time for a cuppa, a few pegs of whiskey, or an impromptu pot-luck session. They point out that they have a much larger circle of friends, most of whom are not Anglo-Indians but with whom they share common socio-cultural bonds and common interests and backgrounds.

Megan Stuart Mills says, “.....from the 1990s the community has become intrinsically Indian.”

(Part II will deal with the marginalized community in India).

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