



COLOURFUL THOUGHTS

Rudy Otter

Anglo-Indians and Goans could have evolved into a single community in India as far back as the year 1911. They had much in common. Both communities had mixed European-settler and Indian ancestry - the Anglo-Indians were of British/Indian descent, and the Goans were of Portuguese/Indian descent. Both communities were Christian. Both communities spoke English.

So why was there the long delay in coming together as one big happy Anglo-Indian community? Why did this only start to happen in earnest in the early 1950s? I would say the fault lay entirely with the arrogant Anglo-Indians of those bygone days.

They regarded most Goans as “less European-looking” than themselves. They thought Goans more closely resembled the Indian side of their dual ancestry.

Now just a minute.

Anglo-Indians were not half as “European-looking” as they had imagined. They actually came in four shades. A minority were white, many were light-brown, many more equally split between medium-brown and dark-brown. I know that in bygone days, Anglo-Indians, no matter what their hue, strived to portray themselves as “whiter than white”, several blaming the harsh Indian sun for their swarthy pigmentation.

It was clear to me, as a “medium-brownie” born and brought up in India in the mid-1900s, that having a fair complexion meant everything to Anglo-Indians in those far-off days.

Nothing else seemed to matter.

If you were a white Anglo-Indian, you were truly blessed. For some unfathomable reason the world owed you a living. Darker-hued Anglos - the medium-browns and the dark-browns - automatically admired you and felt it a privilege to socialise with you or better still marry you. What's more, having blue or green or grey eyes, and fair or ginger hair, were additional jewels in your coveted white crown.

Yet, despite this white-complexion mania among Anglo-Indians, they and the Goans managed to live and work side by side in harmony in those distant days.

In the railway institute, as a youngster, I watched them playing billiards, whist and tombola in good-natured groups. Both communities took part in hockey, cricket, boxing and athletics events. They greeted one another in the street or at railway stations and marketplaces and happily exchanged gossip.

Both communities employed Indian servants - as cooks, cleaners and sometimes even gardeners. Many Anglo-Indians shared with Goans the Roman Catholic faith and attended the same Christian schools. All this outward show of harmony only existed up to a point.

That point was MARRIAGE.

In those olden days I heard of some Goan fathers offering white or light-brown Anglo-Indian bachelors attractive dowries to marry their daughters. Such overtures only served to inflate the already exaggerated self-importance of the Anglo-Indians they pursued.

Predictably, those Anglo-Indian bachelors mostly turned down the Goan dowry offers, but a minority, dazzled by the prospect of sudden wealth, accepted the dowries and then had to face the wrath of their colour-conscious Anglo-Indian relatives who saw the marriage as "letting the family down".

Surely, the irate relatives would argue, their Glen or Gladys "could have done

better?" - a euphemism that meant acquiring a fair (or fairer-skinned) partner. "Doing better" had nothing to do with looks, income, job prospects, intelligence or upbringing - only skin complexion.

I once heard of an Anglo-Indian father somewhere in northern India who was so incensed at a Goan teenager taking a fancy to his light-brown daughter that he chased the Goan down the road brandishing a hockey stick and bellowing at the fleeing youth never to come anywhere near their railway quarters again.

I also knew of a young Anglo-Indian man striding up to a Goan after a railway institute social evening and threatening to beat him up because the Goan, during a tag-dance, had "tagged" his white-skinned sister several times by tapping her partner on the shoulder to dismiss him and taking the girl in his arms. It seems the angry Anglo feared that all that tagging might prompt spectators to believe that his sister was "sweet" on the Goan, an unthinkable thought in those far-off days, the mid-1900s!

Yet, had a white soldier from the local British army camp tagged the belligerent Anglo-Indian's sister's partner on the dance floor and claimed her for himself, the Anglo would undoubtedly have beamed with pride and told everyone within earshot: "See my sister? Look who she's jiving with, men! What's there for her!"

For well over half a century, Goans have been happily part of the Anglo-Indian community and rightly regarded as fellow Anglo-Indians all over the world. We are all now One Big Happy Anglo-Indian Family, and a good thing too. But why that long delay in getting together? Here's why.

Originally, the real Anglo-Indians of India were the British white-settlers. That is what they called themselves - ANGLO-INDIANS.

Those British white-settler Anglo-Indians married Indian women, and the offspring of their European-Indian unions were called "Eurasians" - born in any of those four colours I have already mentioned - white, light-brown, medium-brown, dark-brown. Alas, the Eurasians were mistrusted by both the British white-settler Anglo-Indians,

and the Indians, each community claiming that Eurasian loyalty lay with the “other side”. Fed up with their confusing Eurasian identity, and feeling it would be more advantageous to side with the British, the Eurasians began to appeal for “Anglo-Indian” status, a move that appalled the original Anglo-Indians.

“How can you be Anglo-Indian like ourselves when you are actually Eurasian?” the British white-settlers demanded to know. The Eurasians ignored their objections and kept pressing for Anglo-Indian status, and the white settler Anglo-Indians eventually relented.

In the year 1911 a magic British Raj wand, waved over the Eurasians, transformed them into Anglo-Indians as well, much to their delight. Their dearest dream had come true. Having joyfully achieved what they regarded as an “upgrade” to Anglo-Indian status, the Eurasians felt they had to justify their coveted new identity and began to research deeply and enthusiastically into their British ancestry.

They built up a frenzied collection of frayed documents compiled in smudgy dip-pen handwriting as well as fading photographs of real or imagined white ancestors stretching back to the 19th century, while totally ignoring their Indian side. They not only ignored their “Indian side” but airbrushed it right out of their ancestry, never to be mentioned again.

The “new” Anglo-Indians resolved to protect their upgrade with all the fervour of security officers guarding the gold at Fort Knox. This is why those “new” Anglo-Indians steered clear of marrying Goans and dark-brown Anglos, desperate to keep their stock as “fair-skinned” as possible to reflect their hard-earned Anglo-Indian status.

They yearned to be regarded as white, all-white, nothing but white.

Incidentally, in an Indian city I once heard of a white-skinned young Anglo-Indian woman with blonde hair and blue eyes who mesmerised everyone the moment she stepped out of her house. People, whatever they were doing, would stop to gawp at her. If she looked up, she would see hundreds of Indian, Anglo-Indian and Goan

faces staring down at her from balconies and windows. In the cafes she passed, customers would pause, open-mouthed, while eating their snacks and glare at the white vision. Pedestrians, walking or talking, kept their eyes glued on her. Motorists would toot their horns to signal that the sight of her had brightened their day. Bus passengers and cyclists would leer at her for as long as they could, swivelling their heads to savour every last second of the disappearing mirage...

White Anglo-Indians, in India, in those far-off days, were regarded as more than just superstars; they were up there with the gods and goddesses. That is why a fair skin in those days was such a highly prized commodity on the subcontinent. A fair skin, not education, was the passport to jobs as drivers and guards on the railways, our main occupation in those far-off days.

Goans generally were more intelligent than Anglo-Indians - better educated, better mannered, sensitive to others' feelings, but all these admirable qualities amounted to nothing because Anglo-Indians felt their fairer complexions, real or imagined, gave them the right to feel superior to Goans.

At Anglo-Indian dances in India, superiority complexes based on colour came to the fore. Everyone's eyes would dart around the hall to find out who was the fairest of them all! Rapid assessments based on skin complexion, colour of hair and eyes would be made. As dancing couples swirled, they quickly appraised other couples gliding past them, keeping an eye (a blue one?) open to see if anyone was looking at THEM in that intensely admiring way which signaled that they were the fairest Anglo-Indians present.

This was a thrilling compliment to those concerned, sometimes causing them to show off by exploding into exaggerated laughter at nothing in particular simply to draw even more attention to themselves!

The dancers, in turn, would be watched by elderly folk sitting around the perimeter of the dance floor like a circle of crows, making their own whispered assessments such as: "Who's that nice fair girl jitter-bugging with that greasy chap?" or "Who's that nice fair boy with ginger hair jumping up to catch the balloons?"

The “nice” epithet, by the way, was reserved solely for white Anglo-Indians in those far-off days, meaning others of darker hues were graded, according to their complexion, as not-so-nice or far-from-nice or even outright villains, whatever the true nature of their individual characters!

So has a fair skin ceased to matter altogether in these enlightened times as we power through the new millennium?

Surprisingly, no.

Sales of skin-whitening products in India and all over the world are going through the ozone layer. Sadly, it would seem that many darker-hued people of whatever race (African, Asian, West Indian) still cling to the notion that a white skin is more highly regarded than a brown or black skin. They believe a white skin can propel one quicker and further up the career ladder, open doors previously inaccessible or boost one's matrimonial prospects sky-high by attracting wealthy partners.

And while the blacks and browns are busy “whitening up”, the white races are hell bent on going in the opposite direction. They spend their holidays in perspiring climates, lying semi-clad in the scorching sun for several hours a day in an effort to turn dark-brown or black. They do this, even if it means exposing themselves to the possibility of sunstroke or skin cancer.

Well, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Green? Now there's an interesting colour. If the entire planet is going green to ward off global warming, why don't all of us (browns, blacks, whites, yellows) try having green complexions for a change?

Now there's a thought

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@ **Rudy Otter** is a retired Anglo-Indian journalist and columnist who now writes articles and short stories for our community's own magazines and websites. Contact: otterrp@yahoo.co.uk