



BOOK REVIEW:

*STRAINS IN A MINOR KEY: A CELEBRATION OF SIXTY YEARS IN  
CALCUTTA*

Dorothy McMenamin

Rani Sircar, *Strains In A Minor Key: A Celebration Of Sixty Years In Calcutta*.  
Kolkata: Gangchil, 2013.

Rani Sircar's book captures how *Calcutta* was around the time of Independence right through to the *Kolkata* of sixty years later, a multi-faceted world where many different groups reside. She describes a broad set of minority groups, namely Goans, Armenians, Jews, Chinese, Indian Christians, Syrian Christians and of course Anglo-Indians, and shows how these English-speaking communities can be seen as a continuum extending also to Westernised Hindus and Muslims who went through the Anglo-Indian school system. *Strains in a Minor Key* is not simply focussed on Anglo-Indians, but contains descriptions of the cultural milieu within which Anglo-Indians in 'Cal' lived. It documents the cultural similarities and differences of various English-speaking minorities and raises thought-provoking issues by showing how the groups interacted, or conversely did not interact with each other or with mainstream Indians, instead co-existing separately in both public and private.

*Strains* gives us the larger social context of Anglo-Indian life as it was lived and illustrates how times have changed. In the Anglo-Indian context, times have changed to the extent that at the last Anglo-Indian Reunion in Sydney someone in the audience at one of the seminar's asked, 'Why didn't our parents tell us that we were Anglo-Indian?' The answer is implicit in Rani's book as she outlines a bygone age tainted with discrimination, including the expediency of Anglo-Indians 'passing for Spanish or Italian' if one could not manage to 'pass' as British. Anglo-Indians in the colonial and early postcolonial period often tried to anchor their identity in an

ancestral home outside India, as opposed to those now living in diaspora, a number of whom go in search of their heritage in South Asia. However, seeking an Indian past can be an exercise in rose-tinted nostalgia, old attitudes being dismissed and memories adjusted to fit modern politically correct perceptions. Rani's book deftly and amusingly lifts the covers off these covert exercises!

This in fact is the importance of Rani's writings, because as older generations pass away and memories fade, memoirs describing the past as it was experienced are invaluable. Rani gives names, dates and details about things we know, that without documentation such as hers, will be forgotten. She writes in an engaging chatty tone as she analyses socio-cultural nuances with sharp-eyed ironic observation. She says *Strains* is not an autobiography, and as various patterns emerge from the delightful ramble of a combination of personal memoir and comment, it is more like a dramatic monologue. The author warns against trying too hard to keep track of the interconnections between the vast cast of characters and suggests simply to relish the particular titbit at hand.

*Strains* is a record of middle-class Indian feminism, describing a woman's life in newly Independent India from young adulthood to marriage, into old age. Rani's mother completed her B.A. in Lincoln, Nebraska, while her mother-in-law was part of the All-India Railway tennis team and a crack shot as a markswoman. Rani obtained an M.A. from Madras University in English literature and describes her subsequent exploitation by both the Anglo-Indian school system and Indian Christian tertiary system – because on returning to her parents' home in Calcutta, she was told that having the support of her father meant her level of salary was unimportant. She was the first native Indian to teach English at that Anglo-Indian girls' school, replacing an Anglo-Indian predecessor who had been dismissed by the American principal for spouting anti-Indian prejudice in class, leaving Rani to bear the brunt of that dismissal from her Anglo-Indian colleagues. She taught for a few years until she married, then gave up teaching to look after her husband and children, becoming an Indian housewife because she did not feel she could juggle home and outside work. She weighs up the pros and cons of married women working outside the home, still a universal problem for which satisfactory solutions are elusive, whether in a world with servants or substitute electrical appliances. When Rani recalls her forays into

journalism, whilst raising her children and being published by a local newspaper under the banner of *An Indian Housewife*, she reveals a feminist consciousness lurking beneath her gentle hint that 'a little recognition would be nice,' which I for one believe she deserves.

The author describes herself as an English-speaking, short-haired, drinking, smoking, dancing, party-going woman who wore shameless, sleeveless blouses, and talks of how mainstream Bengalis looked down on emancipated women who adopted these immodest Westernised customs, all of which, along with a particular sort of schooling, had affinities with the British and Anglo-Indians. The dominant culture is apparent when a more traditional Bengali cousin remarked on how the *sri* (grace) of her face had vanished when Rani had her hair cut. But identities and customs are dynamic and in modern India, urban identity is continuously evolving, and Rani ponders on the changes in mainstream mores when she speaks of today's young, middle-class Indian women growing much bolder than before. This can be related to the stereotype of what Indians thought about those brazen and shameless Anglo-Indian women who went out with men and danced at parties, and it can be asked if Anglo-Indians were the forerunners of something inevitable and beneficial, or whether instead urban Indians have degenerated into half-caste shamelessness?

Rani Sircar is half-Tamil and half-Bengali of unmixed Brahmin heritage, but an Indian Christian who married into a non-Brahmin Bengali Christian family from Lahore. She says her husband was part of the select young Indian generation who took over the top British positions in government and business. He was from a railway family, as were both his parents before him, an area of employment stereotypically Anglo-Indian, but often also Indian Christian because the British considered both to be a loyal buffer between ruler and ruled. I get the impression that through connections with employment in the railways, educational institutions, work associations and church, Anglo-Indians of the same class were and are close friends of the Sircar family. From an orthodox Hindu view point the Sircars, as Christians, were technically outcaste and polluting, but their upper class status made them socially acceptable and their Christianity was tactfully overlooked by the mainstream. Nevertheless, Rani's Tamil-Bengali ethnic mixture and her Bengali husband being

Karachi-born and Punjab-bred, rendered the Sircars somewhat out of place among Calcutta Bengalis.

In these circumstances I wonder whether Rani would consider herself an insider, outsider or impartial observer of the Westernised liberal Hindu and Muslim worlds, and the British or Anglo-Indian spheres she describes? Rani gives the impression that like Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians make distinctions among themselves on the grounds of class and region, although intermarriage occurs over such boundaries. So how did, and do, high class Indian Christians like the Sircars regard Anglo-Indians?

Rani discusses the perception of Anglo-Indians by outsiders who see their identity grounded in being unable to pronounce Indian names and only acquainted with kitchen-Hindi or Tamil. She reminds us how Anglo-Indians used to 'look down on Goans and Luso-Indians' because, despite their Portuguese surnames and mixed culture, most were suspected of having no Portuguese blood. She also recalls how Anglo-Indians were fiercely proud of the identity implied by their British names rather than Portuguese names because they knew of lower class Indian Christians who, Anglo-Indians sometimes sneered, had taken the latter names from tombstones, and resented such pretenders to Anglo-Indianness. But she notes Anglo-Indians did not know, or perhaps even care, how to distinguish caste or origin of Indian Christians by their Indian surnames. Rani enlightens us about the intricacies of caste relations, the Westernised Brahmos (a casteless monotheistic Hindu movement), the differences between older and newer Bengali dress, the Bengali *kantha*-quilt and poor Bengali Christian 'cobweb mending' of tattered clothes. Of interest also are her thumbnail sketches of colourful people from different groups and classes in cosmopolitan Calcutta, Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, Jews, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Chinese and foreigners including diplomats.

*Strains* gives a taste of central Calcutta: the Maidan, the noise, smells, hawkers, stalls, trinket-sellers, advertisements, political processions and demonstrations on Chowringhee Road, the main thoroughfare, all rather overwhelming but entrancing. Rani was married in the Bible Society building beside the YMCA on Chowringhee (the first YMCA in India). Later her parents lived on adjacent Park Street, where her

father was District Grand Secretary of the Masonic Lodge, diagonally opposite Flury's Swiss confectionery whose owner advised Rani on puddings. She lovingly describes her first flat, attached to a parsonage, which the Sircars regretfully left due to lack of space. For much of her early married life, Rani lived on Chowringhee beside the Metro Cinema as the family moved to a flat previously occupied by a White Russian in a Chowringhee landmark, a building that was once Whiteaway and Laidlaw, a famous British department store that entered both British and Indian fiction. [See a photograph at <http://www.amazon.in/Strains-Minor-Key-Rani-Sircar/dp/9381346933>] In that building, the tenants ranged from British stayers-on till 1968, through to Anglo-Indians about to migrate, Bengalis, a millionaire's mistress and a Maharaja. Rani talks about the Grand Hotel with its expensive front shops and tawdry stalls at the back, and about Firpo's Italian restaurant with its Anglo-Indian barmen and cabarets. She also describes the New Market, bounded by downmarket Free School Street whose post-War Anglo-Indian brothels Rani did not recognise as a young woman, although the Sircars explored nearby Royd Street where Isaiah's Bar had a reputation for 'Al tarts', and of course Elliott Road, with its Bengali *All India Women's Union Home* and the dalpuris, beloved by everyone, especially Anglo-Indians!

Now in her late eighties, Rani lives in an old peoples' home in Kolkata, but retains a lively young tone in her writing. *Strains in a Minor Key* (2013) is her second book. The first, *Dancing Round the Maypole: Growing Out of British India* (2003) was about life during the Raj. *Strains* continues her inside story of an English speaking Indian Christian world, a minority within a minority. Rani says she danced in her first book and sings in her second, both moving effortlessly through diverse social spheres, some sealed off from each other and others inaccessible to outsiders. In *Dancing* Rani described middle-class school, home and social life across British India and Ceylon, the *joie de vivre* of the world of butlers, baksheesh, sola topi-ed sahibs and memsahibs, elaborate visiting-card rituals, club life, boxwallahs and emerging brown sahibs. That book described Anglo-Indians looking down on native Indian women, the hard-drinking white tea planters of Assam, and it included a chapter on Anglo-Indian cookery. Reviewers of *Dancing* have evoked Kipling and Paul Scott. One newspaper reviewer evoked Allen Sealy's *Trotter-Nama* and Aparna Sen's 36, *Chowringhee Lane*, while Lynne Rebeiro of *Anglo-Indians in Touch* noted 'its

compassion and sensitivity' in exploring colonial cultural tensions, moving between the white, brown and *tanned* (Anglo-Indian) lives, to 'be enjoyed by all with fine indiscrimination'. An Anglo-Indian poster on the website of the Raj India-list stated that the 'poster' read the book to her Grandmother which brought back a flood of memories she had never before heard her Grandmother recall. Another online review suggested that *Dancing* 'demands to be filed next to *A Suitable Boy*, for the light it casts on that' subject, and Rani tells us in *Strains* that her husband served as a model for one of the characters in that novel. Mark Tully noted the importance of *Dancing* for historians to obtain insights into insufficiently studied groups. All these reviewers claim, like myself, that Rani's writing is a gold mine for insights into late and post-colonial social history, particularly Indian interactions with Anglo-Indians.

One of my research interests is 'to see ourselves as others see us' and Rani's insights point the way to understanding how Indians, especially Hindus and Muslims, perceived Anglo-Indians (and vice versa). Importantly, all non-Hindus are *mleccha*, that is, polluting to orthodox high caste Hindus. Rani does not explicitly say so, but implies a stereotypical hierarchy of Hindus looking down on Muslims, and both of these looking down on Christians, with perhaps Hindus more critical of Anglo-Indians. My interest was particularly aroused by Rani's clear understanding of the everyday Hindu worldview (*weltanschauung*) as lived through the rituals of daily life and its minor customs, and she gives us vivid and explicit descriptions of how Hindu and Muslim customs vary from both those of Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians. These clear and fascinating interfaces at the intersections of cultures include, for example, that saliva is very polluting for Hindus (perhaps this is why kissing was forbidden in Indian movies?). This is not so for Muslims and Anglo-Indians who happily eat from the same platter, but interestingly, the saliva taboo is strongly maintained by Indian Christians. However, although beef was not taboo to Christians, there was an understanding among Indian Christians that beef should *not* be cooked in their home, so the Muslim cook of Rani's beef eating neighbours sent cooked roast beef to the Sircars!

The cultural encounters Rani describes are a treasure trove for me. Indian Christians faced dilemmas about 'marrying out'. Rani's father-in-law had a sister, a university lecturer in Delhi, who married a Hindu who was the librarian at the University of

Delhi, whose mother who could not sleep under the same roof as her *mleccha* outsider daughter-in-law, so slept on the verandah to maintain her ritual purity. Rani's father-in-law was heartbroken and did not attend the marriage. Another of his sisters, similarly educated, married a Muslim who did not believe in the Partition of India but nevertheless thought it his duty to migrate to Pakistan, where subsequently his wife became the respected journalist Maya Jameel. Rani's son has told me that some relatives cared nothing about giving up their religion, whilst others did.

Rani also describes a few circumstances of Calcutta's Anglo-Indians marrying out, such as an Anglo-Indian Bengali marriage in the 1970s which was fiercely resented by the Anglo-Indian mother who announced her views in the Agony Column of a local newspaper. An Indian friend of Rani's youth was welcomed by her Domiciled European prospective mother-in-law, who the friend found surrounded with baskets full of documents to prove that nobody in the family had in the past married an Indian! Another Anglo-Indian woman married a Bengali Hindu and became a sari-wearing Bihari Catholic. The prejudiced Anglo-Indian teacher who was Rani's predecessor at her first job, had a niece who married someone who described himself as a Kalighat Brahmin but was a cultural *mleccha* because of his education, so the pair did the Anglo-Indian thing and migrated to Australia. Rani also tells us of the white wives of Indian husbands and their non-Anglo-Indian (by the Indian Constitution's definition) mixed-race children.

Hindu disdain of Anglo-Indians has been noted in past scholarship, but the focus has remained on Anglo-Indian relationships with the British. My interest in *Strains* derives from my current research on Anglo-Indian lives in Pakistan which considers Anglo-Indian and Muslim intersections in contrast with Anglo-Indian lives within a majority Hindu milieu in India. Hence Rani's descriptions of relationships between different mainstream and minority groups in India are fascinating for me, and I highly recommend it as an academic resource worthy of serious scholarly attention, and an entrancing read for those wanting to know more about Anglo-Indian lives.

Since I am an oral historian whose work relies on the memories of others, I cannot but admire Rani's amazing memory. If I had a quarter of her memory, writing my own historical projects would be a waltz in the park! She gives extraordinarily detailed

descriptions of buildings, streets and people, bringing to life her world through changing times. Her descriptions and stories, complete with colour and smells, would entertain and inform anyone who has never visited Kolkata, and take them on a voyage of discovery; or conversely, evoke nostalgia in those who have lived there and migrated as many Anglo-Indians have.

In *Strains* Rani has captured and recorded, with a touch of wistfulness, the passing of an older Anglicised India. Since the Anglo-Indian focus, both nostalgic and academic, is on Calcutta, the book will delight, remind and inform an older generation of Anglo-Indians, just as it should intrigue and hopefully enlighten young readers wanting to learn about the past.

*Strains* is published in India, and these niche-market books often get overlooked in the West, so you need to search for copies from sources online and/or ask your libraries to purchase this book for posterity. I am told that a most reliable source is Ram Advani Booksellers, Mayfair Building, Hazratgani, GPO Box 154, Lucknow, UP 226 001, India, [radvanilko@gmail.com](mailto:radvanilko@gmail.com), especially when marked for attention of Mrs. Ruth Shepherd (no prizes for guessing her ethnicity!)

***Dorothy McMenamín*** has an MA in history and with the sponsorship of Otago University, Dunedin, NZ, is currently researching Anglo-Indian lives in Pakistan where she was born and raised. She has recorded and archived numerous oral histories with elderly Anglo-Indians living in diaspora, for her own research and posterity. Twenty-nine of these edited oral histories are published in *Raj Days to Downunder: Voices from Anglo India to New Zealand* (2010).