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FEATURE ARTICLE: Anglo-Indians as part of the Indian diaspora: making a home in Australia

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Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

A different kind of Indian in Australia?

Besides the Afghan cameleers and the Sikhs in the nineteenth century, one of the earliest communities to migrate from India to Australia was the Anglo-Indians. Anglo-Indians comprise one of the largest communities of mixed descent in the world and are most likely the largest single cultural group of Indians in Australia. In this note, I want to show that on the transnational scale, as part of an Indian diaspora, the changing generational needs and changing policy environments can create new longings for the home that has been left behind and in the process give rise to a new politics of identity. My focus is on the diasporic Anglo-Indians in Australia, who, like other diasporic communities, form transnational links, forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that connect them to the country of origin and those of their residence. As part of the Indian community in Australia, the Anglo-Indians enrich Australian society as much as any other ethnic Indian group and, above all, they bring new sensibilities of mixed race and culture and a historicity into the diasporic policy debate. My hope is that this note would lead to the recognition of huge diversity inherent amongst immigrant Indians. Intellectually, such recognition would lead to a rethinking of Indian-ness in Australia. In terms of policy, understanding the historically formed cultural diversity would allow us specific policy needs that smaller groupings within a broad group might have, within India as well as in Australia. Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have pointed out that Australian multicultural discourse is shaped by the national origins of the migrants who are then given an ethnic identity, not a racial one. People migrating from Indonesia, for example, would all be articulated as Indonesians, without a differentiation between the Dutch and the Indonesians. Such a removal of race from public debate implicitly reaffirms assimilationist ideology and a strong belief in the existence of a mainstream Australian culture. Thus, one policy outcome could be a greater attention to the diversities within the migrant groups.

Who is an Anglo-Indian? The Census of India of 1911 described the Anglo-Indians as a 'domiciled community' of mixed descent, who were also described as Eurasians, 'country-born' or 'half-caste'. Indo-Briton was perhaps the first ever generally accepted designation of the community. Subsequently, terms such as Indo-European, east-Indian, Eurasian were used, but they were seen as ambivalent because of their failure in reflecting the British lineage. Disparaging terms were not uncommon and some of them – half-whites, eight-annas, blacky-whites – were widely used in popular parlance. Not only are the two names derogatory, they also indicate

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the wider resistance towards this community in India. Such racial and cultural prejudice, as noted earlier, arose primarily from political reasons and the social segregation of lives in colonial India. The 1935 Government of India Act defines Anglo-Indians in terms of their paternal ancestry and domicile: 'An Anglo-Indian is a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is a native of India.'

Geography or location is thus at the heart of Anglo-Indian identity. Whereas both Anglo-Indians and Europeans can have European paternal descent, Anglo-Indians were born on Indian soil. This geographical location of birth remains an important marker and identifier of Anglo-Indian identity, in spite of their distinct cultural traits derived from a mixed parentage. The geographic imagination of 'the home', therefore, is crucial to the Anglo-Indians, and seeking this home has remained a hallmark of Anglo-Indian identity even today. 'Home' for the Anglo-Indians has been a contested site shaped by different influences of culture and power, and sweeps over a range of scales. Seeing Britain as fatherland and India as motherland or having an image of itself as a 'homeless' community within the country of their birth are the two important aspects of the community's identity. This 'home' is more of a product of the imagination and a site of everyday lived experiences, a locality where feelings of rootedness ensue from mundane and daily practices. This home is a place with which one remains intimately connected even when physically alienated from it

Marginal or hybrid?

Literature on Anglo-Indians is vast, in spite of the 'microscopic' size of the community and its non-generative nature. It can be divided into three broad categories according to source: early histories by Anglo-Indians themselves, material on Anglo-Indians by Indians and, lastly, post-colonial material on Anglo-Indians by British scholars. In the first category falls the great amount of introspective historical material written by Anglo-Indians themselves, and within it one can detect two broad genres. An acute sense of self-awareness, a sense of having to explain one's position and background, and a reflection on how they became victims of double discrimination chracterise the early writings by Herbert Stark, Reginald Maher and Sir Frank Anthony. Popular fiction written by Anglo-Indians themselves - such as *Neglected Lives* by Steve Alter - may be included in this category. More recently, however, there has been an attempt to record the oral histories of early migrants of their memories of India, an effort to look back to the home that was not, and reminisce about the good and bad times in India. Some of it has been formally recorded through projects and published in printed forms, but not all of it is formal, and are published in Association journals and souvenirs that are meant for local circulation. Another category of material is available from the internet - through social networking sites and through personally maintained sites that give a glimpse into this community's history and achievements.

Although racial blending has been taking place since the unrecorded days of history, and racial purity has been proven beyond doubt as a myth, mixed groups who were produced from large-scale colonial expansion were unfortunately caught between two warring groups, the ruler and the oppressed. This unenviable position of the Anglo-Indians gave rise to racial prejudice against them within India, making social and political factors play more important roles than racial differences in shaping their identity. British colonial society - a ruling upper class - had no place for them but made use of their occupational skills in consolidating the empire in Asia. At the same time the caste-driven hierarchical Indian society considered them as traitors since they identified with, and supported, the British rule. Henry Gidney, a one time leader of the community, described this identity conflict as 'a trinity of existence and interests'. For occupational purposes they were classed as

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'statutory natives of India', for defence, they were 'European-British subjects, and for social, political and legislative purposes they were seen as simply 'Anglo-Indians'.

Racially mixed groups of people have been seen in different ways by social scientists. Robert Park, an American sociologist, in 1928 used Georg Simmel's concept of marginality to refer to the social position as 'cultural hybrids' of mixed race people. Park characterised marginality with the 'sense of divided self' that reflects the tensions and antagonisms between the two societies of which the mixed race groups are a product. Gist and Dworkin (1972) and Gist and Wright (1973) took up the concept of the 'marginal man' who is ridden with culture conflict to elaborate on the Anglo-Indians' complex identity. Such a formulation would give rise to binary oppositions – blacks and whites for example – that ignore the complexities within human identities and that overlooks that conceptions of race or mixed race and social status are historically, geographically and culturally specific. In an earlier work (1990) I used similar formulations to explain how and why the Anglo-Indian community in India developed a plan for a separate homeland at McCluskiegunge in the early 1930s. Since then, a genre of theoretical approaches based on hybridities of identity has been applied in mixed race studies. The argument is that by seeing a group of people as inhabiting the margins, one implicitly assumed the centrality or hegemony of the other race or community. Sociologists have shown that race, nationality, ethnicity and culture are more social constructs that shift across space and time. Not only are they not absolute 'things', these aspects of human identities can also be collapsed depending on the time and place. On the other hand, hybridity theory allows us to validate mixed race as a legitimate psychosocial and political category. Such an approach to individual identity recognises that identities are fluid and contingent, rather than fixed and unchangeable. Individuals have multiple identities which fluctuate, overlap, and are fragmented, dynamic, ambiguous, and aspects of these may sometimes conflict with each other. To put it in more concrete terms, it may, for example, be possible for an Anglo-Indian in Australia to feel safer in this country, but at the same time be proud of his Indian heritage, a musician from Calcutta, a hockey player, a father and an active member of an association.

The search for a home

The prejudice of broader Indian communities against Anglo-Indians meant that the significant contributions made by the latter to various spheres of Indian life – in sports, arts and culture, and particularly in establishing and spreading a system of English education that Indians are so proud of today – went unnoticed or unappreciated. It is not unsurprising then that the Anglo-Indians' predominant self-image – in the early part of last century and expressed in a number of popular and serious writings – was a sense of 'being stuck in damn India' (E M Forster, *A Passage to India*, 1924), 'hostages of the British' in India, a sadness in being a 'biological residue' of imperialism, and a sense of having been betrayed by the ruling British (Anthony, 1969). By the 1920s, another historian of the Anglo-Indian community, Wallace (p.13), noted that the pride Anglo-Indians have in their 'British connection and European heritage' is largely false and dangerous because 'it makes the Eurasian a worshipper of the Union Jack too often at the expense of his despising the standard of the country to which he belongs.' It was, however, easier said than done. The rising hostilities associated with the wave of nationalism that swept the Indian subcontinent also meant that the Anglo-Indians' marginal position was heightened resulting in an intensification of their utopian search for a home.

'Utopia', by definition, means 'nowhere' in Greek. But whilst a utopia is seen as impractical, doomed to fail, it is also associated with the connotations of 'an ideal place', created by intention, meant for intellectual and social

release of those who live there. In the early 1930s, the Anglo-Indians reacted to their heightened identity crisis by opting for a utopian venture to create a 'homeland', a venture that has only a few equals in the world in the past or at present. The immediate factor behind the plans for a homeland was the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (Government of India Act of 1919) which started a process of Indianisation of the government services. This reform process and the resultant loss of traditional advantage and priority in jobs in certain areas of administration were bitterly resented by the Anglo-Indians. Despite the memoranda from the Anglo-Indian Association, the Simon Commission report categorically stated that the Anglo-Indians must open out for themselves fresh avenues of employment and depend less on the Government. The impending departure of the British from India generated a sense of betrayal and insecurity. When the Anglo-Indians were designated by the 1935 Act as Statutory Natives of India in the job market, but treating them as British subjects in respect of education and internal security, the time was ripe to plan for a separate homeland.

Mr E T McCluskie, a prominent figure of the Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta and a sitting member of the Bengal Legislative Council, mooted the idea of a homeland, a *mooluk*, the Anglo-India. In his leaflet *Dawn of a New Era*, McCluskie said 'If the Dawn of a New Era has come for India, it has obviously come for the Domiciled Community who are part of India, and it is high time that they began to wake up and take an interest in what is going on around them.' The idea of a 'homeland' within India appealed to the sentiments of a number of prominent leaders and The Colonisation Society of India Limited was registered under the Indian Companies Act of 1913 to raise capital to buy land. About 10,000 acres of land was bought by the CSI in 1933 spread over 10 villages in the Palamau district near Ranchi in Chotanagpur plateau. The land had a small railway station, Lapra, which is today called McCluskiegunge. For a few years McCluskiegunge came alive with Anglo-Indian settlers bringing to it their distinctive way of life, a lifestyle that earned the place the nickname *chota bilait* amongst the locals, a name and an aura associated with it that have stuck to the place even today. However, with the beginning of the Second World War, the death of McCluskie and the ensuing lack of leadership, and finally the partition and India's independence, many of the younger settlers left and McCluskiegunge turned into a failed utopia, bearing historical evidence of the ceaseless search for a home by the Anglo-Indians.

Leaving India in search of a new home

In 1947, there were approximately 300,000 Anglo-Indians in India, and, although many integrated into the upper class Indian Hindu society, an exodus soon began. On 15 August, 1947, HMAS *Manoora* reached the Western Australian shore with more than700 Anglo-Indians on board. *Manoora* was a troopship that was 'refitted' to evacuate Australians and Europeans from India. In the publicity that followed this unanticipated arrival, Blunt (p.139) has shown, newspapers portrayed India as 'a home of violence and strife' and Australia as 'where people can live in freedom and peace', such ideas of national freedom and democracy being bound to notions of racial purity that prompted increasingly stringent policies to create and to maintain a White Australia. In this contested politics of whiteness and the ambivalent place of the Anglo-Indians in White Australia, the main effort of the community became to position themselves more in terms of 'culture' than race in relation to the broader Anglo-Celtic settler populations.

Australia, however, was not the major destination in the initial years after Indian independence. Against the advice of community leaders, around 50,000 had migrated out of India by 1970, due to fear and doubt about remaining in India and the Hindu-Muslim riots that followed partition. Half of this number resettled in Britain in the late 1940s and 1950s. Australia, however, received the 'second wave of migration' of the Indian Anglo-Indian

community, with the biggest numbers coming to Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. It is pertinent to remember that for Australia, Anglo-Indians were among the first Asians to immigrate into the country with the relaxation of White Australia Policy. Although according to Gilbert (1996) some Anglo-Indians did migrate to Australia in 1852 and 1854, and an organisation called the South Australian Board of Advice and Correspondence for Anglo-Indian Colonisation was formed the first major phase of immigration was from 1964 till mid 1980s.

The 2006 Australian Census showed that there are 147,110 Indian-born people residing in Australia. Amongst this, we can guess that around 14.3% were of Anglo-Indian descent from indirect indicators such as 10% having English heritage and another 4.3% responding as having Anglo-Indian heritage. Thus today, even if one leaves aside the early history of settlement, the Anglo-Indian community comprises an important single segment of the Indian diaspora in India. Two distinct periods can be detected in the history of integration of the Anglo-Indian community in Australia – the first spanning the early years from 1960s and 1970s, and the second is the later, post-1980s phase.

The first phase of migration began with the renaming in 1964 of the 'Assimilation Branch' of the Department of Immigration as the 'Integration Branch', reflecting a change of the White Australia policy. These changes allowed the immigration of a large number of Anglo-Indians into Western and Southern Australia. It is presumed that many railways and dockyard employees as well as other professionals arrived in Australia. However, an historian of the community in Australia, Gilbert (1996) writes:

> Anglo-Indians entered the professions as doctors, engineers and journalists, gone into business, government, academic and computer technology. Beginning with limited resources, most now possess the trappings of material success – home, cars, television, video and surplus funds for entertainment and overseas holidays.

In the early years, successful settling and integrating in the Australian society was possible for the Anglo-Indians because of their 'Western' culture or way of life, Catholic (24%) or Anglican (5%) religious beliefs, English education and particularly the ability to speak colloquial English, dress style (such as relative ease of women with knee-length skirts), a love of western music, an affection for sports, clubs and outdoor activities, and fewer inhibitions than middle-class Indians about dancing, drinking and smoking even by women. Interestingly, the cultural orientation of the community to that of the British was the factor that created conflicts over their identity in India and led to prejudices against them. In Australia, this cultural orientation became a useful tool for their integration within the community. English gave the Anglo-Indians an added advantage over the European, non-English-speaking migrants. Other critical factors that helped in their integration were the endogamous and closely knit nature of the Anglo-Indian community, a nature that facilitated the requests for visas on 'family reunion' ground.

The way English was spoken

In the wake of British departure from India, with the failure of a homeland project, migrating to and integrating within Australia seemed the most sensible solution to many Anglo-Indians. A large amount of sacrifice seemed acceptable for the purpose of carving out a new identity in this new homeland. The sacrifice often amounted to a deliberate effort to hide one's Indian past, and numerous stories are told by early settlers about how they attempted to perfect their English accent to hide any traces of Indian-ness in it. Not everyone could successfully conceal their accent – and indeed anthropologists have suggested that Anglo-Indians from different parts of India and even different parts of Calcutta have distinctly different accents –

and this became one of the areas in which the Anglo-Indians first began to feel 'different'.

Skin colour

For the Anglo-Indians too 'skin colour' mattered a great deal, as their complexion ranged from the darkest brown to the lightest of pale skins. Within a colonial society, skin colour had been a major issue amongst the Anglo-Indians, and not unlike the rest of the Indian milieu, although for very different reasons, had been an indicator of social status and prestige. Traditionally, Anglo-Indians with a very light skin were capable of passing off as British. In colonial India this would have resulted in better job opportunities and class privileges. For many Anglo-Indian women, a lighter skin meant better off husbands or even British husbands. Writing about skin colour, Gilbert notes that while many Anglo-Indians are physically distinguishable from Anglo-Celtic Australians, many others are not and consequently those who are darker became victims of discrimination and prejudice. There were occasions, in spite of changes in the White Australia policy, when members of the same family could not enter the country. Gilbert gives an example of a 1964 case in which a man was rejected from immigrating to Australia, being classified as 'non-European' due to a 'swarthy and dark' complexion. In contrast, the other twin was fair and looked completely European in appearance. This twin brother was accepted, although both were born of a British Army father and an Indian-born mother.

From Both Sides Now is the name of a book that was published by the Australian Anglo-Indian Association (Inc) based in Perth, Western Australia. The book was put together by Joy Gasper, Convenor of the Oral History Project that she ran from 2000 until 2003. This book puts together within its covers the long interviews of a number of first and one second generation Anglo-Indian community members in an effort to record the personal histories of prominent and old Anglo-Indians. Oral history, as a concept, is different from what is commonly seen as 'history', and is by its very nature subjective, selective and heavily dependent on human memories. The valuable book, therefore, is not only a resource for tracking the early migrants' histories but is also a symbol of a renewed effort in self-analysis by the community. It can be seen as an outcome of the new, multicultural policies of Australia that allowed and even encouraged such 'coming out'. It can also be seen as an effort by the Anglo-Indians to kick-start the dialogue with a new Indian policy environment that acknowledges - and does not look down on - the diaspora who left the country. For those Anglo-Indians who had settled in Australia, a renewed attempt in thinking about identity marks this process and is expressed in a revival of new networks, associations and renewed contacts with India through visits, through funding of charitable organizations working with poor Anglo-Indians in India.

Role of associations

A few words here about the crucial role played by the associations would not be out of place. The conservative view of such ethnic organisations is that they promote a kind of ghettoisation and hence should be disallowed. My experience, however, is quite the contrary to this view. These associations have played a key role in bringing together the Anglo-Indian community that comprises of individuals from different regions of India and with different class backgrounds. They allow the community to get together for the celebration of Christmas with spicy Indian food, or to sing old songs from Radio Ceylon and Calcutta B on karaoke, or play old-time games like carom or even have seasonal ballroom dances. These are activities that other ethnic Indian communities would tend not to engage in. In most of these associations, membership is by 'self-identification', and not necessarily restricted, allowing Indian Christians to not only become members but also sometimes to hold executive positions.

These associations also help in widening the networks, for those coming in or leaving for a new city to make contacts, but above all, they help the Anglo-Indians to remain connected to the Indian communities in India or in Australia and other Anglo-Indians in other cities or in other countries. Almost all these associations provide small amounts of funds for locally based charitable organisations in India that are working to alleviate poverty amongst Anglo-Indians.

The Australian Anglo-Indian Association (Inc) or AAIA was established in 1988 to 'promote the Anglo-Indian identity in this multicultural country' and to 'preserve and perpetuate Anglo-Indian culture'. It now has its own building on its own land in Perth and is connected to the International Federation of Anglo-Indian Associations which connects all diasporic communities in all countries in their effort to 'bring generations together'. This seems to be one of the main concerns of the Anglo-Indians – that 'when they (the next generations) come looking for their ancestry, (they) can find their rich heritage and can carry on where this generation has left off.' The need to educate the future generation in Anglo-Indian heritage is understandable in terms of the non-replacement or even declining numbers of the community. From this perspective, again the cohesive nature of the community has given it an added advantage in connecting the large diaspora spread physically over four continents. Again, the English education of the community has helped them to gain a visible presence in the internet.

Personal histories

One would, however, ask: what was the need for Anglo-Indians to 'come out' in multicultural Australia, if they had integrated so well in Australia? Some personal reflections provide valuable glimpses into the reasons why this coming out was necessary. The historian of the community, Reginald Maher, talks about the discrimination he experienced while working for *The Statesman* newspaper in Calcutta: 'I wasn't white enough for certain jobs', but once he migrated to Australia, he realized that he had to settle for a much 'lower' category of job than he was used to. This seems to have been one feeling that has consistently nagged the community – that although they are economically better off in Australia they do not necessarily occupy positions higher than what they held 'back there at home'. This glass ceiling had ailed the Anglo-Indian community during the British rule, as the snobbish ruling British elite created a position for the mixed races at a level lower than them. Barney, one of the old Anglo-Indians, notes in his interview: 'the British ...gave us wonderful laws, both civic and others....However, the Anglo-Indians always had to settle for a lesser job and pay second fiddle.' And although he was 'overjoyed to live in this country', he lamented that he still had to be happy with being an usher.

Women, who were crucial to the whole project of 'making home' in Australia, bore the greatest brunt of the migration and loss of cultural ties to India. They had the difficulty of running a household without the chokra or the servant boy, and the ayah or the nanny. Anglo-Indian women were the pioneers as working women in India and were even role models for early women from the Brahmo Samaj, a social reformist religion based in Bengal, who came out of homes to get an education from the colleges and universities. But in Australia, the relentless pressures of household chores, added with childcare responsibilities and working outside of home in various jobs sometimes made their lives difficult. Often the husband would undertake further studies to get more qualification, leaving almost all the home-making tasks on women.

Anglo-Indians in Australia bring home the understanding of the diversity and heterogeneity within what is seen as the broader 'Indian' community. The community brings attention to a neglected group of mixed race Indians who

are eager to gain recognition as Indians. Indians are settled all over the world, and India has been the epicentre of migration throughout history. Indians have moved around with the British rulers as their clerks, individually as traders but also as indentured labour and other forms of cheap labour. They lived in Fiji, British Guiana, South Africa, Canada and Kenya. The migration of Indians to Australia is not new, although it has also recently come to public attention. This is because the migration began with the Anglo-Indians, who are often not recognised in India as genuine Indians.

The Indian diaspora is generally 'hungry for recognition' from their motherland and value awards and other forms of honours and recognition. The Anglo-Indians need to be recognised as a legitimate Indian diasporic group with a distinctively Indian origin and ethnicity, with close links with India. The Anglo-Indian community has made important contributions to the enrichment of Indian social and community life, and those who live in Australia identify themselves as Indians, as much as those who have remained in India. This group of Indians have been victims of cruel imperial history and have been caught between two warring cultures - Indians nevertheless who are hungry for recognition from their motherland.

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