



AN ANGLO-INDIAN ENCLAVE WITHIN AN INDIAN FORTRESS: THE GRANT GOVAN HOME

R. Dean Wright and Ehren D. Wright

Drake University Des Moines, Iowa 50311

In this paper Professor Wright discusses the lifestyle of Anglo-Indians living in an old peoples' home in Delhi. These Anglo-Indians continue to maintain a lifestyle that emphasises their British heritage in modern India. Professor Wright is a regular contributor to the IJAIS and has been researching the Anglo-Indians for many years.

Over the past fifty years the number of Anglo-Indians remaining in India, those who identify themselves as members of the community, have decreased from some 250,000 to a number that now is estimated to be as low as 20,000. During this half-century Anglo-Indians have scattered to the far corners of the planet. Networking and community identify becomes increasingly difficult with the passage of time. In India the population is not only small but is equally scattered throughout the country. Many of those who remain rely upon their family and friends to share the culture that was once uniquely identifiable. It is not unusual to find a family who can count eighty or ninety percent of their relatives and friends who have migrated to another country. With the passage of time ties are lost and closeness disappears. Among those who remain in India, many have merged into the general population or fail to find the old institutions that identified them: church, school, and community. As one male Anglo-Indian mentioned to me, as he looked at his two sons, "They will never know what it is like to be an Anglo-Indian. We were once ninety-plus percent of the schools, today we are less than ten percent." Without institutionalized ways to maintain a tradition, that tradition has the possibility of being lost. There are not many people remaining in India who can recall when they were Anglo-Indians living their life as members of their community in the days of the British.

When we were talking with members of the Anglo-Indian community we kept hearing about this place in Old Delhi, a location where several elderly Anglo-Indians had retired. This was a community that had been established by a person from Great Britain that was to provide refuge for relatively poor and retired Anglo-Indians. We set out to find the location, but the Grant Govan Home is not easy to find. It is hidden in a residential district of Delhi, not far from some of the very congested streets that characterize the older part of the city. When you first approach it you cannot help but be impressed by the well-kept yards, the neat residential buildings, and the overall orderliness. Hidden behind the walls and gates are several Anglo-Indians who have the opportunity to enjoy their senior years among others from the community.

It was well-known that Anglo-Indians were fiercely loyal to the British and their heritage. During times of national crisis (1857 Sepoy Mutiny or India's First War for Indian Independence) Anglo-Indians kept the rails moving and communication from one end of the subcontinent to the other by ensuring that the telegraph was operational. Even though the British had earlier prevented Anglo-Indians from holding positions of authority for fear that they might lead a revolution against the colonists, as had happened in other parts of the world, members of the community had remained steadfast in their loyalty to the British. This unswerving attachment was rewarded by guaranteed jobs in many work areas, many of these written into the constitution. Among the most important was railroading, Anglo-Indians holding literally all of the important jobs within the industry and locating themselves throughout the nation wherever a railroad center could be found. Eventually Anglo-Indians came to be engineers, conductors, and station masters on literally all of the railroad lines throughout India.

Fifty years ago Independence came to India and with it major shifts in the life of members within the community. Protected jobs were eliminated at ten per cent each year until all positions would be solely on the basis of merit. This meant that the monopoly that had been enjoyed in rails, customs, and telegraph would be ended by 1957. A reality of the situation was that Anglo- Indians, by continuing loyalty to England, did not earn them favors among the rapidly rising elites of India. In reality membership often was translated as a liability rather than the previous asset, many

Anglo-Indians believing that their heritage caused them to be subjectively excluded from employment and privilege. No longer at home in India, and with the British abandoning them, many members migrated from India to nations that would be more favorable to their life-style and heritage ... England, Canada, United States, and Australia.

No one could keep track of how many Anglo-Indians used exodus as their way to manage a newly independent India, but it is estimated that there were perhaps 250,000 members of the community spread throughout India in 1940. By 1960 about half of this number had migrated to more culturally friendly nations and by 1990 only 20,000 to 30,000 remained. Many of those who did not migrate assumed plural identities and often plural names and cultural identity to protect their jobs and ensure a livelihood. It is common today for Anglo-Indians to give their children two sets of names, one Hindi and the other English in derivation. In addition, one finds many Anglo-Indians who speak the local dialect and claim Hinduism as their religion so, as they note, there will be less chance of discrimination when it comes to work, housing, and association.

There are still numbers of Anglo-Indians who display their cultural heritage with pride. Most of these are wealthy or professionals who can enjoy a middle-class position because the occupation that they have chosen is ensured. These may be business owners, managers of international companies, Indian representatives of Western businesses and companies, entertainers, successful members of the military, and many older residents who no longer find it necessary to survive in disguise. These residents still serve as the core of a very quickly disappearing community that can no longer hold a viable position in an increasing nationalistic India.

Many of the elderly members still hold to their heritage, a few of them live in residential locations where they can give support to each other, especially in such communities as Dehri Dun, Bangalore, Calcutta, McCluskiegunge, and Delhi. One particularly interesting place is the Grant Govan Home in Old Delhi. When you travel the main routes North from Connaught Circle in New Delhi you quickly enter the older part of the city. The streets are narrow, the traffic is congested, there is a sense that

this is what Gideon Sjoberg was talking about in his classic work, The Preindustrial City. It is estimated that there are upwards to 750,000 people per square mile in this business and residential part of Delhi.

The Grant Govan Homes is a community for aging Anglo-Indians located in one of the older sections of Delhi. There are eight cottages, seven of which serve as the homes of older members of the Community. The other cottage serves as a common room, a place where all seven families can come together and share meals, converse, play games, or "remember when." Above the fireplace is a large color portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, to the right is a framed photograph of John Majors, and on another wall is the Queen Mother greeting Pope John Paul II. This small plot of land, surrounded by a wall that protects it from the outside world, contains neatly trimmed lawns, flower beds, and a tree planted in 1990 marking the 50th anniversary of the Grant Govan Homes. The tree was planted by the wife of the British High Commissioner and has a nearby marker proclaiming it as a "Jubilee Tree" -- a symbolic term often used by the British to celebrate the 50th anniversary of some special event. This very small community is indeed an island of England still remaining in Delhi, India, as a marker of, as one member of the Community put it, "The Good Old Days."

When we first went to the Grant Govan Home in 1993, we were guided there by our Anglo Indian friend. The walk there was as much a sign of the Anglo-Indian legacy and their place in modern India as the home itself was. We took an auto-rickshaw to a large intersection. I believe it was a bus stop, and the only way this guide knew to get to the home. We walked from there about a half-mile across train tracks and urban-industrial neighborhoods in poor repair. On the way we talked about the role of the Anglo-Indians in the past; as train engineers, coal workers, luggage handlers, and every other variety of train worker. All the positions on the Indian rail system had been reserved for the Anglo-Indians. After the expulsion of the British government those jobs were no longer reserved. Every person we spoke to that day would have told you that the Indian Rail System had slid in efficiency and prestige since the days when they and their fathers or their brothers had been responsible for its performance. The tracks themselves had lost their luster. The Rail had been the key to military control of a region so large no army could have maintained martial law.

The British army relied heavily on the loyalty of the Anglo-Indian population to maintain a working and efficient system of deployment and distribution. When control of India was turned over to the Indian people, mandated Anglo-Indian control of the rail system was also lost. It was now an Indian military that may need to get to some remote corner quickly and it was an India-loyal workforce that would be in charge of such an important tool.

The colonial legacy of all conquered nations is a point of difficulty. When the Spanish and Portuguese conquered the indigenous nations of South America, the conquered people and the conquerors intermarried until neither remained distinct and their progeny took on a new ethnic identity. India had a different dynamic in that the conqueror and conquered were aware of each other for many hundreds of years, through trade routes, before the dynamic of the relation became one of governance. The British soldier in India married or had relations with the conquered Indian woman, but unlike the South American example, disease, famine and slaughter did not destroy the remainder of the population. Instead of the native population fading to be replaced by the Anglo-offspring; the Anglo-offspring fades to re-integrate with the mainstream population. The Anglo-Indian initially prizes his Anglo ancestry and then as the nations independence is reasserted and its internal dynamic fails to prize all that is western, the Anglo again becomes Indian. This is what we see as our host, a middle aged Anglo-Indian who is proud of his remembered history and still calls himself a British-descendant, stands with his son who honors his father in their home but becomes and Indian among his friends. This against the backdrop of the more British-than-British Grant Govan Home, with its union jack and distinctly western architecture, provides a fitting example of the rapid re-integration of the second generation Anglo-Indian community into the Hindu mainstream.

As the population of India grows, and the history of this emerging nation as an independent and distinguished player on the world field develops, such antiquated political notions as constitutionally defined racial segments must be left behind. A community that no longer has an active membership to be constitutionally identified seems a farce similar to having seats reserved for long defunct political parties. The pride in history exhibited at the Grant-Govan is heart warming and would make a nice chapter in a history book, but the youth of the Anglo- Indian community have

ascribed it to be a part of their past. They no longer wish to be identified with the long gone conquerors of British history, choosing instead to forge a new role within the India of today.

The Grant Govan Home symbolizes much for the Anglo-Indian Community, for it is an oasis where the culture that was once so wide-spread in India is still maintained. The Community is too small today to maintain its cultural identity in the manner that it once enjoyed. Only here and there is the collectivity of members large enough and the members close enough to relay to each other the stories of those days that are now over five decades old. Stories are told of those Anglo-Indians who migrated to other nations and quickly were absorbed into the culture and all identity with India and others who shared the Anglo-Indian cultural heritage was lost. Just as many Anglo-Indians who remain in India are forced to live two lives (private ones having an Anglo-Indian heritage and public ones of indigenous Indian) in order to successfully compete for jobs and security, those who migrated were equally quite often forced to do the same for the logical end of survival. Yet, within the walls of the Grant Govan Home Anglo-Indians can be as Anglo as they want without any apprehension. Yet, in a decade or two there will no longer be any person alive who remembers the days of colonial India. Stories will, at that time, be reserved for history books and remembrances of those who still recognize and appreciate their heritage.

[Email to:Professor Roy Dean Wright](#)