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## FOOD AND LANGUAGE AS MARKERS OF IDENTITY: THE ANGLO INDIAN COMMUNITY'S SURVIVAL SINCE PARTITION

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### PART II

#### CHAPTER TWO: LANGUAGE

If the food customs of the Anglo-Indian Community formed a part of their identity in the years before Partition, language and their accent did so to an even further extent. While the blending of Eastern and Western cuisine that took place was often similar to that of the Europeans living in colonial India, the Anglo-Indian accent was unquestionably the community's own. Their way of speaking marked them out as different from India's white colonial rulers; meanwhile, English was their main language and this set them apart from the rest of India's native population which communicated in its own various languages – Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, etc. This English-as-a-first-language trait continued to define the community in India in the years after Partition. For those who immigrated, it was their accent that shaped their experiences abroad as they struggled to fit in but also retain who they were.

Before Partition, this distinct Anglo-Indian accent was often discussed by the community. "And indeed, it would be hard to put even a pin's point, so to speak, between many a fair Eurasian and his English brother". However, as this article goes on to state, there is "abundant and practical proof" of the difference: "speech or a nameless something indicates the alien..."<sup>[1]</sup> More generally, Moreno notes of his Eurasian community, "the language they all speak is English, their dress European... but unconsciously all betray many Indian traits in their habits and expression."<sup>[2]</sup>

Frank Anthony (1908-1993), a prominent community leader took issue with this line of thought; he argued that generalizations about the Anglo-Indian accent – more

commonly and derogatorily known as the “chee-chee” (dirty) accent - were ignorant and, quite simply, untrue. Rather, he argued, “accent in the community varies from stratum to stratum and from North to South”.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, as the Hobson-Jobson dictionary points out in its definition of “cheechee”: “there are many well-educated East Indians who are quite free from this mincing accent”.<sup>[4]</sup>

However, the breadth of commentary on the “chee-chee” accent – in works of fiction, from the mouths of community members themselves, and in recent memoirs – all point to the conclusion that a distinctive and general Anglo-Indian accent did indeed exist. Even Anthony himself, Blunt points out, spoke of feeling at home in Wales because of the similar accent: “I thought they were Anglo-Indians: they thought that I was Welsh. I do not know whether their accent was like mine or mine like theirs. The accent of the Anglo-Indians has an intonation very much like that of the Welsh.”<sup>[5]</sup>

This similarity of the Anglo-Indian accent to the Welsh one receives particular attention in Wells’ “Accents of English”. Under his “India” section, there is a subsection which solely studies “the characteristic Anglo-Indian accent”. He refers readers to his section on the Welsh accent “for similar lengthening of consonants”. Geraldine Charles’ memoir captures this further, titling her article “Bombay Welsh” and recalling her parent’s accents. She remembers that when her father spoke, people would often mistake him as Welsh. Further, she points out how linked the accent was to what it meant to be Anglo-Indian – after all, when people asked about her parent’s accents, she had to explain what “Anglo-Indian” itself meant.<sup>[6]</sup> What emerges, then, is that the Anglo-Indian community did have a distinct manner of speaking English that was uniquely their own. Because of this, it became central to their identity.

This worked against them. It marked them out as Anglo-Indian at a time when it was unfavorable to be one. Despite the fact that the Anglo-Indian community “completely identified itself with the British way of life”, they were looked down upon by the British as inferior, degenerate human beings.<sup>[7]</sup> “What is the objection to having a native woman as a wife; do the children degenerate? - I think the character they produce degenerates. Although the half-castes possess occasionally many qualities of the European, still they have many of the vices of the natives.”<sup>[8]</sup> The Eurasian accent was considered one of these vices. Along with declining to eat spicy food, worrying

that the ayahs nursing their children would lead to bad “native” qualities being inherited and wearing “topi” hats to avoid the degeneration thought to result from exposure to the heat, Europeans in India tried their best to avoid their children picking up the “chee-chee” Eurasian accent.[9]

As the Report on Colonization and Settlement explains, among English parents, there was an understandable “desire to remove (their) children from the demoralizing influence of intercourse with domestics of the country.” Exposure to native life in early childhood – local accents inclusive - was thought to have a negative effect.[10] Kate Platt, the author of a household guide (1923), warned against such exposure, giving particular attention to the Eurasian accent. She advised that with respect to Anglo-Indian child-minders “the objection of accent applies, for the accent of the Eurasian is very infectious and small children quickly adopt it”.[11] In another example, the memoir of two Anglo-Indian sisters shows that this attitude was prevalent: in discussing the dismissal of their childhood nanny, they wrote “we never knew what she did that brought the end; perhaps we caught her chi-chi accent”.[12]

This negative association of Anglo-Indians with their accent comes through yet again in another household guide: “girls brought up in India have a strong cheechee accent, and are lazy, careless and independent”.[13] Examples of “chee-chee” in the “Hobson-Jobson” dictionary show further this general contempt. “He is no favorite with the pure native, whose language he speaks as his own in addition to the hybrid minced English (known as “chee-chee”), which he also employs”.[14] A distinguishing feature that set them apart from both Englishman and native, the Anglo-Indian accent, then, was central to the community’s experience, and thus identity, in pre-Independence India.

This importance given to accent can in part be attributed to the rise of the accent as a social symbol that took place in England around the mid-nineteenth century. As one book on language (1850) remarked, “No saying was ever truer than that good breeding and good education are soon discovered from the style of speaking.”[15] That Anglo-Indians spoke with a certain accent fit in with general English perceptions at the time: it was thought reflective of their degenerate physical, and mental and moral state.

This marker of the Anglo-Indian identity also led to discrimination for those who migrated upon Indian Independence. There are several accounts by first generation Anglo-Indians that point to their accent as a source of contention. As Lyons, an Anglo-Indian immigrant to Australia points out in her memoirs, “I had to face another kind of discrimination ...In spite of obtaining all the qualifications required in Australia, I found myself continually at the receiving end of discrimination ...because of my Anglo-Indian accent”.[16] She felt she was picked upon in India and in Australia because of her accent – Indians felt she spoke Hindi with a funny accent while Australians felt she spoke English with too much of an Indian lilt.

Deefholts recalls a similar experience. “When I came to Canada from India, at six, I was made fun of in school for my accent, for not knowing slang, not getting jokes...”[17] In another example, one of Blunt’s interviewees recalls that some Anglo-Indians tried to hide their origins despite their obvious accents. She encounters some Anglo-Indian girls and asks them if they are from India or Pakistan; they lie and say “No” in response.[18] While Blunt puts this down to a “long tradition of ‘passing’ as white and British”, it seems likely that this attitude resulted as well from a certain level of discrimination faced by immigrants in the West. The Anglo-Indian accent, then, led to much prejudice and it often prevented members of the community from passing themselves off as European – in India under British rule, and later on, as immigrants abroad. This, at least in part, explains why the community remains distinct today. Quite simply, it was forced; its attempts to merge with European society failed.

The children of Anglo-Indian immigrants, however, have naturally lost this aspect of identity; they speak as their societies do and as the population around them does – with English, Canadian, American or Australian accents. As Deefholts nostalgically concludes, “It is sad that certain Anglo-Indian qualities will disappear in the diaspora after a generation”.[19]

However, the Anglo-Indian accent will not entirely fade. After all, the community in India is still marked out by their way of speaking. As a recent YouTube video that parodies the Anglo-Indian accent indicates, the idea of an Anglo-Indian manner of speaking – with words such as “bloody” and “man” thrown in – still exists.[20] Further, the effort currently being made to record aspects of the lives of first

generation immigrants is ensuring that memories of the Anglo-Indian accent as central to identity will not disappear. The community, then, seems set to survive.

In addition to accent, English itself is part of the community's identity. Under the British Raj, English was the Anglo-Indian mother-tongue and this, along with a refusal to learn the local vernacular was a distinct feature of what it meant to be Anglo-Indian. As Moreno has written, "Eurasian children have so imbibed a disdain for things Eastern that they do not readily apply themselves to the learning of vernaculars."[\[21\]](#)

This was a result the Anglo-Indian desire to be British. "The real troubles of the Eurasian community centre about one cardinal point... in upbringing, mentality, mode of life, they strive to be British; it is their inheritance."[\[22\]](#) Anglo-Indians were not only stuck to the English language but were refusing to learn anything Indian. The Inter-Provincial Board for Anglo-Indian and European Education, for example, illustrated perfectly this Anglo-Indian attitude on the eve of Independence. It documented a regrettably low standard in the teaching of Indian languages and "the absence of a working knowledge of the language even at the high school stage". This was not the fault of teachers or the education system, but rather a reflection of the Anglo-Indian mentality. "We feel that the chief cause contributing to this inefficiency is the pupil's outlook on Indian culture. There is a lack of proper appreciation for and interest in Indian languages which can often be traced back to the home."[\[23\]](#)

Blunt's work makes this point. She found that many Anglo-Indian children learned "to be fluent in an Indian language from their ayah" but that they often lost this language skill when they attended school.[\[24\]](#) Once contact with their Indian ayah diminished the influence of their parents and the community took over and all Hindi was forgotten. Anglo-Indians, then, were defined not only by English and their accents but also by the fact that they often refused to learn the local language. This of course made those who stayed on in India after Independence more likely to remain distinct from the Indian society around them.

That this was a part of their struggle to emulate the British comes through in their choice of second language. Before Independence, French or Latin were often

elected over the local vernacular. An advert for enrolment at “Stanes European High School”, for example, shows that the school offered both Tamil and French as second languages.[25] Assuming French was chosen at least fifty percent of the time, many Anglo-Indians would have had knowledge of yet another European language. This would have set them apart from the Indians once again. Different culinary habits, different accent, different mother tongue, and now, a different second language - with this additional marker of difference, it is even more understandable that the community still exists today. It had, quite simply, an identity too separate to merge with Gandhi’s “masses of India”.

As Independence approached, however, the uselessness of learning European languages over local ones was discussed. As one discussion went, “...If an Anglo-Indian police officer has to face an unruly or turbulent crowd, what use will either French or Latin be to him unless he can speak to a mob in their own language?” In addition, the author went on to state, “Anglo-Indian officers who are engaged in investigation ...among people who do not understand the English language have found the medium of Hindustani of incalculable help”. [26] More generally, many did agree that the community, given the changes occurring in pre-Independence India, “should embrace a new orientation...” [27] Perhaps, then, it was not obvious that the community would remain distinct from the rest of Indian society?

Indeed, not all Anglo-Indians needed prompting regarding embracing things Indian. Many did speak the local language, and some spoke several. As the story of “Helen of Burma” - the “remarkable story of a young Anglo-Indian nurse’s heroism” – recounted, Helen was “an accomplished musician, educated at the Craigmare College, Edinburgh”, and spoke Tamil, Hindustani and Burmese. [28] However, what must be remembered is that this example and the changes being made to language education applied only to second and subsequent languages. That English would remain the mother-tongue of the community was never questioned. It is this that meant the community was likely to survive as a separate entity in the new India.

Lewin’s work suggests that the general lack of understanding of Indian languages continued to define even those who immigrated. In her interviews with 26 Australian women, the younger participants showed a sense of shame that they did not speak any Indian language. “I am very, very ashamed to say that I know nothing but

English”.<sup>[29]</sup> This interviewee further explained that “the Anglo-Indian community in India always tried to associate with the British side... therefore the Indian languages were not given a priority or even much of a place”. Another interviewee expresses the same remorse: “I’m ashamed to say ... I don’t know a lot about the Indian culture”.<sup>[30]</sup> In India, ignorance of the local vernacular was something many Anglo-Indians were proud of; abroad this turned to shame. Interestingly, however, in both cases the lack of knowledge of an Indian language became definitive to what it meant to be Anglo-Indian.

While many Anglo-Indians did not speak an Indian language, most knew several Indian words and phrases. “I spoke only English, colored with very few words and phrases of grammatically incorrect Hindi”.<sup>[31]</sup> In another example, Deefholt’s memoir recalls that “when Anglo-Indians spoke to each other or told a joke, they sometimes used Hindi words”.<sup>[32]</sup> Blunt’s references to “kitchen Hindi” show this further: Anglo-Indians, much like India’s British rulers, spoke just enough Hindi to speak to their servants. “Not fluent Hindustani, not polite Hindustani... it was servant’s Hindustani”.<sup>[33]</sup>

This mixing of language, much like the Anglo-Indian accent, has been lost in second generation Anglo-Indian immigrants. As Deefholts (the child of Anglo-Indian immigrants) writes, “my sister and I would look blankly at each other when the (Hindi) punch-line was delivered”.<sup>[34]</sup> Neither has the tradition lived on India. Unlike those who immigrated and who lost all knowledge of Hindi, those who stayed on often became fluent in the local vernacular. “I chatted to a number of younger Anglo-Indian men who spoke the local language (Hindi in most instances) and presented themselves as mainstream Indians for one essential reason: employment”.<sup>[35]</sup>

Indeed, the English language as a marker of the Anglo-Indian identity in India does seem to be disappearing. “Because Anglo-Indian religious and linguistic traditions are considered alien to Indian nationalism, it is hard to maintain both identities side by side in today’s India”.<sup>[36]</sup> This, however, is in public. It is harder to gauge the home life of the community. As documented in the previous section, Anglo-Indians still cling to British traditions in their kitchens at home. It is not a stretch to presume, then, that English is still predominant in the homes of the community, much as eating meatloaf and sitting at a table with serviettes and cutlery is. This would most

certainly help explain the continuance of the community's identity since Independence.

In this light, the efforts made by the community to emigrate at Partition make much sense. While a (false) longing for the British "Home" and a sense of being British no doubt played a part, pragmatism seems the more likely cause: India after the British would be very different, and English – the Anglo-Indian language and a strong marker of the community's identity – would most likely come under threat with the move India was making towards Indianization. With this policy that emphasized Indian identities and cultures after the British departure in 1947, Anglo-Indians feared that English, a crucial aspect of their identity, would be taken away.[37] Further, they feared discrimination because of their British heritage. Many Indians agreed with Gandhi's observation that "Eurasians as a class have occupied or attempted to occupy the position of rulers".[38] It is no wonder they did not always feel welcome. As Snell (1944) predicted, "No future worthy of the community... can be hoped for in India". Language was decisive to the community's experience and the choice many made to immigrate. With such tenacious feelings about the potential loss of identity, it follows that the community has survived since Partition; the Anglo-Indian identity was simply too strong to die out.

As a final point, much like curry made its way into the English diet many Indian derived words are now a part of English. The Hobson-Jobson dictionary shows this; it "consists of Oriental words highly assimilated... to the English vernacular..."[39] *Curry*, *verandah*, *shawl* and *calico* are examples of such words.[40] This is important when looking at Anglo-Indian English. Perhaps the mixture of Hindi and English was not so distinct from India's white rulers? Indeed, much as Anglo-Indian women knew "Kitchen Hindi", so did English memsahibs. Learning Hindi was even recommended as a 'must' in one household guide. "The first duty of a mistress is, of course, to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants; therefore it is necessary she should learn to speak Hindustani."[41] However, there is little evidence to suggest that British citizens returning to England after years in India spoke – even among themselves - with much Hindi mixed into their language. And it seems unlikely that their children would listen to them telling jokes with a punch-line in Hindi (as the Anglo-Indian Deefholts recalls). It can be concluded, then, that Anglo-Indian English



was indeed unique to the community.

In sum, the community after Partition – both in India and abroad – survived because of its strong identity. Part of this was a result of language – their accent, the sprinkling of Indian words and phrases they used and the stubbornness with which they clung to English. However, while the Anglo-Indian community still exists today, the way in which it is defined by language has changed – abroad, language as a marker of identity exists only in the memories and memoirs of first generation immigrants and their children while in India the accent still exists but is often covered up by fluent Hindi in an attempt to fit in.

## CONCLUSION

From the two sections above it can be concluded that the Anglo-Indian community had, and still has a distinct set of food habits and a unique manner of speaking, although this second aspect has changed over time. Memories of these two facets of identity from the time before Partition are still strong – in elder members of the community via memory of their lives before Independence and in younger members due to food rituals and from observing their parents speak. These factors, and more importantly, the fact that they are unique to the Anglo-Indian community alone are important in understanding why Anglo-Indians are the “only south Asian hybrid group to have withstood the reducing factors of absorption and emigration since” 1947.[\[42\]](#) As Mills points out, the Anglo-Indian culture and identity is not merely an emulation of European culture but rather “an identifiable force that was naturally perpetuated by an endogamous community”; this distinctive culture is reflected in the community’s speech patterns and cuisine.[\[43\]](#)

These two factors developed as the Anglo-Indian community did. As Dalrymple has documented, before the rise of the Racial Raj, children of mixed descent moved between languages and different modes of eating as easily and naturally as walking from one room to another. They were sometimes Indian and sometimes English, composing Persian poetry, for instance but also sending English letters to relatives in England. Many would eat curry and rice with their mothers’ families but traditional English food with their British colleagues of the East India Company. This “assimilated, integrated world” changed.[\[44\]](#) “In the Great Mutiny of 1857... suddenly

everyone had to take positions. The Anglo-Indians ... (had) to make a decision: which side are they on?" Further, as the Eurasian population began to expand rapidly in the eighteenth century, some British officials began to fear that they might "prove disloyal to British interests".<sup>[45]</sup> This, in addition to changing British attitudes around 1800, (favoring concepts of racial purity, the British were increasingly disapproving of mixed marriages) led to a blow to those of mixed race.<sup>[46]</sup> As the British Raj grew powerful and more established, Eurasians were rejected. The Anglo-Indian community formed as a result, forming to protest their increasing rejection. As this happened, a distinct accent and cuisine evolved. Aiming to be English but betraying their Indian origins, the Anglo-Indian community created a unique cuisine and manner of speaking that was not British, but their own. Marsala steak, spicy curries, and Christmas cake were a part of Anglo-Indian life, and their unique "chi-chi accent" paralleled a Welsh one, except with Hindi words thrown in.

Masters, in his novel, "Bhowani Junction", was indeed correct when he played up food and language to show the Anglo-Indian mindset around the time of Partition. – the mother of the main character chews betel nut only in secret as she wants to hide her Indian origins while the protagonist at one point admits that Hindustani is a language she knows but has "tried all (her) life to believe (she) never knew".<sup>[47]</sup>

Of course, food and language are not the only factors that define the community. Other facets of identity such as manner of dress, religion, music and education play major roles in the community's identity too. For instance, Masters also indicates that Anglo-Indian dress was central to identity. He was correct in giving attention to the "topi" hat. "He wore his topi all day and most of the night, to show he was not Indian".<sup>[48]</sup> And when the protagonist decides she is on the side of those Indians fighting for Independence, she symbolically sheds her frocks and skirts and begins to wear a sari.

More generally, clothing adverts in Anglo-Indian newspapers indicate that Anglo-Indians dressed entirely in the Western style. This aspect of identity, however, has faded. Western dress for those who have immigrated to the West is not an indicator of their Anglo-Indian roots; meanwhile, in India, the community's women have begun to wear saris outside and in the workplace to avoid harassment and discrimination.<sup>[49]</sup> Dress, then, along with other factors - a crucial one being

Christianity – must be looked at when looking at the community's identity. These are outside the scope of this paper, but could most certainly be further explored if time and word-count constraints would allow.

As a final point, when looking at the Anglo-Indian identity, it must be asked: When compared to other hybrid populations, are they unique? If so, what makes them so? The Mestizos and Mulattoes – those born when Europeans arrived in the New World and mixed with the Red Indians and imported Negroes respectively – are not distinct societies as the Anglo-Indians of today are. Rather, they “created the Mexican nation” by absorbing those of unmixed origins.<sup>[50]</sup> The Anglo-Indians did not play such a role, and neither did they merge with local indigenous society. Why? Unlike the less materially, technologically and culturally advanced societies of the Americas, “Indian society had its established norms and taboos and ... had become exclusive in approach”.<sup>[51]</sup> When the Anglo-Indians were rejected by their British fathers from the late eighteenth century onwards, they perhaps did not turn to their Indian roots because the societies of their caste-conscious Indian mothers would not accept them. They were indeed, as Hawes book is titled, “poor relations” all around.

Hybrid populations were also born of colonial rule in Burma and Ceylon. These too have barely stood the test of time. As one news article states of the Burgher population, “pride in their heritage struggles to compensate for dwindling numbers.”<sup>[52]</sup> Not as numerous as the Anglo-Indians, these populations, it seems, were largely forced to marry outside their communities. In addition, Varma points out that these “mixed communities were better adjusted with the indigenous environment and people due to local variations”.<sup>[53]</sup> As he notes, Indian society is unique in its tradition of identifying hybrid populations “apparently with the paternal side” but in reality treating them “as inferior to both”.<sup>[54]</sup> With these other hybrid populations, then, a specific identity – as defined by food and language but also other factors such as dress, music and religion – did not evolve. Either the mixed population grew to be dominant (Mestizos, Mulattoes) or its maternal roots absorbed it (Burghers, Anglo-Burmans).

In closing, cuisine and language have been central factors in defining the Anglo-Indian community; they help explain the community's survival since Partition both in India and abroad. In India the importance given by community members to English

food and language as well as the unique Anglo-Indian accent has led to the survival of their status as a minority population; conversely, abroad, curries, food memories and Hindi words and phrases have helped develop a collective community memory and a sense of a unique ethnicity that should not be lost.

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## NOTES

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