



ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN: YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW

Cheryl Shivan

Article 366(2) of The Constitution of India states:

... “an Anglo-Indian” means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only; ... (155)

The title “Anglo-Indian” which was adopted by the community of people of mixed race descent and which was given official sanction in 1911 by Lord Hardinge, the then Viceroy of India, had another and earlier point of reference. The nomenclature was originally used by the British, resident sometimes for several generations in India. This group was also called the ‘country born’ and not generally regarded as being of the same social and economic standing as the British officials of the Covenanted category who were seen more as ‘birds of passage’. Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, ‘Eurasians’, which was the name under which the mixed-race individuals were earlier clubbed, began to see themselves as no different from the ‘Anglo-Indians’ and so strongly proposed that the term be used to refer to them too. Recognition as such was however not readily granted and it took the community sixty odd years of petitioning the British government before it could achieve a change. This usurpation of nomenclature did not please most of the resident English as they saw themselves as a people apart, despite the comparisons made by the Eurasians, especially in terms of better economic position and as being homogeneously similar which the Eurasians were not. Hence, once the Eurasians became Anglo-Indians, the first Anglo-Indians went back to being just ‘British’ or ‘the whites’.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that in the course of British trade and

rule that was unveiled in India, two groups of people have laid claim to the nomenclature 'Anglo-Indian' and hence two groups of men and women have gone by the labels 'Anglo-Indian Men' and 'Anglo-Indian Women'. For the British, the term 'Anglo-Indian' was more a locality specific identification – British (Anglo) living in India (Indian). But for the Eurasian, the adoption of the same epithet was culture specific – 'Anglo' standing for British ancestry in the male line and 'Indian' for Indian ancestry in the female line.

With the establishment of trading centers, a substantial white male presence came to be located on Indian soil. While there was a large English male population, there was an absence of English women. The early charters of the company forbade the women from sharing the risks and privations of the men and so for many years, the Englishmen were deprived of the companionship of their own women folk and had to find other avenues either for concubinage or marriage. The Company's men obtained their women from among the Portuguese Catholic Metis population that had come into existence almost eighty years earlier and when that avenue was exhausted, took up with Indian women widowed through battle or, secured slave-girls who after their masters' deaths found themselves abandoned. Successful relationships were forged between the white men and the Indian women. Apart from the need for sexual gratification, the white man found himself quite content with the companionship that his Indian lady provided. He was very often taken up with the great beauty of his Indian mistress and found her warmer and more receptive to his advances than the European woman. The native woman was also presumed to be more obedient, and in many instances did not demand marriage. Finally, the Indian woman was seen as the medium through which closer links could be established with the Indian population. The Indian wives, on their part, learnt the language of their husbands, followed English customs, and, English practices set the tone in the homes.

The first Eurasian children were those produced by the Portuguese settlers with the native women and the British started to make their own contributions towards miscegenation in India by the end of the sixteenth or at the latest by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Hence, English society or a semblance of such was maintained by the English men and their Indian born Europeanized children. The

mixed-race children, the Eurasians, were often referred to as “the natural ‘collaborating class’ in an expanding imperial enterprise” (Malchow 105). This would, however, refer more precisely to the Eurasian sons whose knowledge of an Indian language and acquaintance with Indian customs made them an important link between the trader and the native. While the men were busy helping their fathers build the empire, the women were the homemakers. From among the Eurasian women were found brides for further Englishmen coming out to India or for the Eurasian sons of white men in India. It was also expected that a white man should marry a Eurasian woman who was herself precluded from securing an Indian husband. Once a substantial number of Eurasian women came into being, the practice of marrying Indian women was greatly reduced.

Three discriminatory acts were passed between 1786 and 1795, by the British, against the Eurasians. The motives for the deliberate oppression of the Eurasians are ascribed to greed, fear of the Eurasians’ swelling ranks and the dubious claim that the Indians could not tolerate working under half-castes. These acts crippled the mixed-race class’ educational and employment opportunities, reduced several to penury, scarred many psychologically and marred the marital prospects of the men. If the normal course of life had to proceed uninterrupted by discrimination, the Eurasian girls would have continued to be available as brides for Eurasian men. But after the community’s reversal of fortunes, the white men were better marriage material and came to be preferred over the Eurasian men – for, while the British changed their attitude towards Eurasian men, their preference for Eurasian brides remained largely unaffected. Thus overlooked, the Eurasian men who seldom married white women had to get partners from among the Indian female populace. The women were therefore seen as marrying upwards and improving their stock while the men married downwards, investing their offspring with a greater percentage of Indian blood. Hawes remarks that the girls’ better prospects were recognized by them and this often caused them to look down upon the boys from their community. Therefore, changing policies, for sometime at least, did not affect the women as much as it destroyed the financial and mental security of their brothers. However, not all Eurasian women could have found white spouses. Given that the earliest form of discrimination was colour based, the Eurasian girls of darker complexions would have had their choices limited to the Eurasian men. The

chances of the fairer girls having better marital prospects would continue till Indian independence.

The tide against Eurasian women turned around the mid 1800s. Just as the presence of Eurasian women had once made marriage with native women no longer necessary, in the same way, the arrival of a larger number of Englishwomen with all the ideological baggage of the century, rendered marriage with the Eurasians not only unnecessary but also a disgrace under the then evolving theories of racial superiority and purity. The Eurasian offspring, both male and female, 'half-caste' in essence, soon became a sign of the white man's shame. Fed with idyllic pictures of the strong, resolute, morally upright Englishman struggling valiantly to run the British Empire overseas, his mixed blood offspring created a dent in the Victorian woman's picture of her countrymen in India. The Englishwomen therefore and with a vengeance set about the task of creating divides between the different races.

In India, the Victorian women enjoyed more freedom than they would ever have had in strict Victorian England. They had time to travel, play sport, cultivate a lot of hobbies and eventually some of them took to writing about life, travel and romance in India. In their literary texts they purported to convey 'authentic' information about colonial life overseas, information that contrasted starkly with that offered by earlier writers especially with regard to the mixed-race women. In almost every early account of the Eurasian woman by British male writers, she is described in grudging terms of beauty and sensuality and endowed with a passion that makes her difficult to resist. The Englishman, therefore, was under the constant threat of submitting to her charms. The English Rose found this hard to digest and resorted to character slandering. Readers are constantly fed with images of Eurasian women of slack morality, pleasure loving, scheming wenches who in their attempt to mimic the English without the economic means to do so, parade about garishly dressed evincing no sense of fashion or modesty. This contrasts strongly with the description of the mixed race women given a century earlier in the anonymous novel, *Hartly House* (1789). Their "dark complexions and sparkling eyes gave them the appearance of animation and health the Europeans had no pretension to ..." (Caplan, *Iconographies*, 866).

If duplicity, 'passing' for white, prostitution, husband hunting and a myriad other charges were leveled against the Eurasian woman, it was because there was perhaps an element of truth in them. Where the British novelists first, and later Indian fiction writers who repeatedly used such images were unjustly wrong, was in labeling the community in toto with these negative impressions. Every community the world over has its own set of embarrassments and Dover drives home the point thus:

I maintain that in any part of the world the half-caste is no more a blasphemer, no more a drunkard, no more a pervert, no more a brothel-monger, than the pure bred white or black. Indeed, it may be claimed that if his morals are not intrinsically superior, they are at least practically so, in as much as morality is for him an economic necessity. (43)

Economic security is a panacea for many maladies and poverty has caused many an individual to act out of character. Once discrimination set in, the Eurasian women together with their male counterparts began to have qualms about their future. Discrimination resulted in financial instability, and financial instability while prompting some to look for alternative employment, paralysed others, and ultimately it was the family that suffered. While men have found it easier to neglect or abandon wives and children, the opposite was the case with the women. Some in desperate situations perhaps resorted to immoral ways to keep the home afloat.

The Eurasian woman who secured an English husband was considered fortunate. But not all such women were lucky to get a man who would stick to them through thick and thin. A Eurasian wife was one thing in India and quite another in Britain. Many white men returning home to England deserted their Indian or Eurasian women and children. Lewin states, "The notion that such unions were regarded as universally desirable by a mythical and homogenous 'Anglo-Indian' woman are not valid" (4). Thus abandoned or in penury the women ran from pillar to post with their children. If qualified for some work, they put their hands to the grind; otherwise the oldest trade in the world was the last resort – not commendable but certainly a method of survival. Given the financial slide, education began to assume importance in the lives of many.

Buettner writes that in late colonial India boys were taught English, Latin, Scripture,

Mathematics and utilitarian subjects like Urdu, Physical Science, Chemistry, Book-keeping, Shorthand, Accounting and Mechanical Drawing and Surveying. These fitted them for jobs at the lower level of the public services and commercial sectors. In the early days of colonial educational enterprise, the girls were taught all that was necessary to equip them to be homemakers. In the later years, the girls were given vocational training in dress-making, nursing, teaching and in office skills such as shorthand, typewriting and book-keeping. A lot of emphasis was also laid in acquiring a knowledge of painting, drawing, music, dancing, deportment and correct accent and pronunciation. In short, they were trained in cultural subjects that would provide them with social graces. Even till Independence the Englishmen outnumbered the women and despite the taboos against marrying Eurasians such unions did take place occasionally. In such an eventuality it became very important for the Eurasian girls to know how to present themselves in society.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Eurasian women started to mark out niches for themselves in areas other than the home. They joined the Civil and Military Nursing Services which were established in the 1870s and 1890s respectively. In the early 1900s they were a majority in Government, Civil and Railway Hospitals. The women were also employed as shop-assistants in European-owned shops. During the First-World War many Anglo-Indians were conscripted into the different military units but once the war was over the units were demobilized and by the 1930s an estimated one-third of the Anglo-Indian men were left jobless. It was at this time that the Eurasian community that was now recognized as the Anglo-Indian community and which at this point of time had also become exceedingly endogamous began to experience the value of its womenfolk. With many of their men being rendered jobless, the women took up the plough in greater numbers and in a greater variety of professions; as governesses, teachers and sometimes even as domestics. Their entry into the work arena was not looked on favourably and discrimination was encountered there too. In many cases the Anglo-Indians were not paid on par with their English counterparts. Others were hired only to be fired almost immediately for their 'chi-chi' accents. However, unmindful of such negativity, the women persevered and have made their mark in every field they have entered giving rise today to more positive stereotypes.

Post-colonial India has witnessed a change in the educational and marriage practices of the Anglo-Indian women. Once women started to leave their homes in favour of joining the workforce, they also began to understand the importance of acquiring a certain level of education that could help them enter a variety of other professions. Here the girls have been more ambitious than the boys. In the course of his research Caplan visited several Anglo-Indian schools in Madras and reports on the feedback he received from Heads of institutions:

In school, the boys are not as interested in their studies as the girls; you get more boys being detained ... because of their lack of interest. Many of them would like to leave school and take up any job and earn a few rupees a day, rather than go to the end of the road, pass their tenth, twelfth, go to college, have a trade. They prefer something today to long time benefits. (39)

This disinclination of a larger number of boys to go in for higher education has a telling effect on the women's choice of partners. The women, being without an iota of doubt, the more determined of the two, have once again started marrying out of the community. In the early days the Englishmen were the favoured partners, then the community became largely endogamous but recently, there is an increasing trend for marriages with non-Anglo-Indian men, however, "These unions can be understood not as assertions of common kinship with members of these bride-taking groups, as in the colonial past, but in terms mainly of a search for improved financial security and status, and the belief that these are unobtainable within the Anglo-India community" (Caplan, CC, 80). The marrying 'out' of Anglo-Indian women is however not viewed approvingly by many sections of the community today. The loss of well-educated and professionally well-placed Anglo-Indian women is bemoaned since their children do not technically become 'Anglo-Indian'. The community still insists on descent from the male line.

Older Anglo-Indians are worried that the race might die out one day but while trying to preserve the community's heritage principally through literature, which is truly commendable, they have not however thought of more concrete alternatives for the perpetuation of the race. From the day the community came into existence it has proved to be, predominantly, a patriarchal one. The women, despite their significant roles within and outside the home have not made any attempt to find equality with the men even at the level of a definition. A person is an Anglo-Indian only if his

'father' is an Anglo-Indian. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that if the mother is Anglo-Indian, but has married out of the community, her children, even if they have been brought up in the culture of the community, are denied the status of 'Anglo-Indian' while those with non-Anglo-Indian mothers, brought up in the culture and language of their mothers, are. With the changing marriage patterns taking place the world over, marriages outside the community will only be on the increase and yes, the community might eventually die out if it continues to live in the past. Two non Anglo-Indian writers, Mark Faassen, "Beyond the Raj" and Robyn Andrews, "A Calcutta Christmas", whose articles cited appeared in CTR's publication *The Way We Are: An Anglo-Indian Mosaic* made powerful cases for a redefinition in order to ensure an increase in the number of members as well as to ensure that all children, born of Anglo-Indian fathers and Anglo-Indian mothers, irrespective of the community of their respective partners, are treated equally and are given the option of being 'Anglo-Indian' if they so desire to.

Anglo-Indian women writers dwell on identities past and present, they even consider calling themselves 'global citizens' without being more far-sighted. If women are indeed as Léopold Senghor says, "the depository of the clan's past and the guarantor of its future", (McLeod, 83), then Anglo-Indian women should make more concerted efforts to ensure the survival of the community by readdressing vital issues concerning its future and reorganizing an identity that is both durable and far more encompassing than it is today.

Cheryl-Ann Gerardine Shivan lives in Pondicherry, India, with her husband and two daughters. She works as a Selection Grade Lecturer in a College of Education. She has a doctorate in English Literature from Pondicherry University. Her thesis was on the writings of Anglo-Indian women with focus on the stereotypes about the community and the women in particular and the way these women writers, consciously or otherwise, contest these images in their writings. Cheryl-Ann is also a freelance copy-editor. She can be contacted via email at :cherylshivan@eth.net.

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