

Mapping a Dwindling Community

Kolkata Tales

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Christmas in Calcutta: Anglo Indian Stories and Essays

by Robyn Andrews;

Sage Publications, 2014;

pp 208, Rs. 695.

With a pleasingly alliterative name, *Christmas in Calcutta* is a welcome introduction to the lives of the Anglo-Indian community in the city.

Who is an Anglo-Indian? And where do they stand in India? These are the questions *Christmas in Calcutta* sets out to answer. Unlike what one would imagine, neither is simple to do. The constitution The Indian Constitution states that ‘...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.’¹

In this book, Andrews focuses only on Anglo-Indians of British ancestry, although over the course of her research, she finds it harder to establish it as just that. The term Anglo-Indian refers to the children of British officers by their Indian wives - but not vice-versa. Strictly speaking, it excludes children of even European descent, significant at a time when the British were attempting to establish a stronghold in India. According to Andrews, the strict delineation was later adopted by the Anglo-Indians themselves, to imitate the Hindu caste hierarchy, perhaps in an effort to impose order in the fledgling community.

Each of the four sections that this book is divided into ask questions vital to the community; Identity focuses on the origins of the community in India, how they came to be where they are; Faith looks at the role of religion, especially modern day practice of Christianity, the third section points out how the education system fails to introduce the community to the twenty-first century; and finally Community Care talks about the consolidation of the community through outreach programmes, festivals et cetera. The book attempts to map the community across a

¹ Article 366(2) of the Indian Constitution

² Fisher, Michael H. (2007), "Excluding and Including "Natives of India": Early-Nineteenth-Century British-Indian Race Relations in Britain", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 (2): 303–314 [305]
eSS Review, Bhattacharya on Andrews

variety of topics and issues, not just focussing on socio-economic matters. This is accomplished primarily by using participant-observer methodology. Through stories, memoir pieces, interviews and essays the book serves as a window into the history and lives of very real people in the community.

The section on Identity deals with the historical origins of the community. An important question the author raises is pertinent on a larger scale than just the community in question—why aren't children of British or Anglo-Indian women accorded legal Anglo-Indian status? It is the same kind of patriarchal prejudice one finds so many examples everywhere in Indian bureaucracy.

Culturally Anglo-Indians tend to practice Christianity (most identify as Catholics). Their spirituality and faith permeates their everyday lives, with progressively more Indian practices being incorporated these days. The adoption of *Namaste* as the formal greeting, the use of marigold and aster in religious ceremonies—these are small examples of Hindu customs making inroads into their traditional way of life. The Vatican's inculturation policies are catching up with what is already happening in India. The official indigenisation to local practices present particular difficulties, as the kind of indigenisation in India moves them away from the practices that they (Anglo-Indians) are comfortable with (here referring to more widely accepted Western practices).

Anglo-Indians have had a huge impact on the Indian education system; the earliest schools were established for the children of British and Portuguese offices, which later became recruiting grounds for the Raj. In the latter half of the twentieth century, though, it is uncertain whether they have access to education services themselves. It is very easy for Anglo-Indian children to slip through the cracks in the system, with some members of the community members unaware of or unable to avail of decent education. Government apathy is another reason cited for their backwardness as well the requirement to learn a 'native' language other than English during their schooling years.

In Calcutta, the Anglo-Indian community is very active in terms of educational and vocational support, providing medical services, home support items as well as care for the elderly. Calcutta's Anglo-Indians are a reasonably socially cohesive group, which was fairly uncommon until recently.

With an easy conversational style of writing, the book is a welcome introduction to the lives of Anglo-Indians. The mention of popular city locales is an added bonus to keep readers familiar with the city interested. Andrew's close association with several of the individuals interviewed in the book, as well as her obvious enthusiasm for the subject translate into her writing (especially in the Foreword, where the Christmas in question is actually celebrated).

When the British left India, there were roughly 8,00,000 Anglo-Indians. Today, that number stands at less than 3,50,000.² Like the Parsis and Iranians, Anglo-Indians place an elevated importance on ancestry, religion and community—something which contributes to the diminishing of their community numbers. Tiny communities in India have a difficult reputation of being on their deathbeds. Andrew's work goes a long way towards quelling this misconception and reiterates the vitality of the community.

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² Fisher, Michael H. (2007), "Excluding and Including "Natives of India": Early-Nineteenth-Century British-Indian Race Relations in Britain", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 (2): 303–314 [305]