

The algebra of belonging

The Anglo-Indians: Portrait of a Community

By Barry O' Brien

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SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY

At over 500 pages, *The Anglo Indians: Portrait of a Community* by Barry O' Brien is a sweeping, comprehensive account of a people who seem to be perennially in danger of being waylaid by history.

This is certainly not the first biography of the Anglo-Indians by an Anglo-Indian. There have been several to date, and almost all of them are mentioned in O' Brien's book — which he duly acknowledges. In fact, the more in-depth parts of this book are those in which he revisits, in copious detail, the earlier accounts, or encounters them anew. One might ask, then, is there anything that sets this book apart?

Yes, there is: the scope. O' Brien has gone as far back in history, and has travelled as widely in geography in his quest to touch upon each and every aspect — social, cultural, historical and political — of the community's life over five centuries in the Indian subcontinent. He has also given much space to the Anglo-Indian diaspora, especially in Canada and Australia, apart from the United Kingdom of course. This has expanded not just the geographical footprint of the narrative, but also provided a record of the nature of the Anglo-Indians' participation in the social life of two nations, India and their adopted home. That O' Brien is a sincere stakeholder in the present and future of this country's Anglo-Indian community — he was nominated to represent the community in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly (2006 - 2011) and is the President-in-Chief of the All-India Anglo-Indian Association — benefits this book greatly, because he not only gets the pulse of his community, but has had seamless access to archives and documents which are only available to one who has the advantage of that close proximity.

Insider he is, but O' Brien is also a man of his day — columnist, journalist, educator, quizmaster and social worker — to whom history speaks through multiple means. He has hence tried to draw the portrait of his community both as a participant and also as one conscious of the larger forces of history at play. The book tracks the coming of age of a community and how it mirrored the coming of age of what became the sovereign republic of India — “from not being Indian at heart to becoming Indian in every atom of their being”. This duality has its pitfalls, because there are parts in which it seems

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Structured in four parts, the book begins with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Kerala in 1498, which birthed the earliest of European mixed-race people in the subcontinent, variously referred to in history as ‘Luso-Indian’ in the beginning, then generically as ‘Eurasian’, and finally as ‘Anglo-Indian’. This part covers the maximum span of history, as with newer waves of colonialists, new settlers arrived. With new settlers, more and more unions between European men and native women became not just possible but in fact, normative and encouraged. The Portuguese encouraged their soldiers to marry local Indian women so a mixed race people would emerge who could engage more easily with Indians on their behalf. Soon, the *fringe*s became a common presence in the fashionable quarters of India's burgeoning new colonial cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. And from that very moment, the community's entrenched ‘schizophrenia’ became apparent: they were white, spoke English, and were Christians with everyday European habits, and yet they were not British enough to be invited to the boardroom of the colonial power elite. And for the same reasons they were considered *outré* among the natives as well.

O' Brien spends considerable time detailing how, with the changing nature of conquest, the proximity of the new mixed-race populace to the institutions of power also changed. Two historical shifts stand out. The first was enacted after the Mulattoes overwhelmed the French colonists in Haiti. Taking a cue from that, the British sabotaged the Eurasian community, publicly voicing a newfound suspicion about their loyalty to the cause of the Empire. This was in the late 18th century. This diminution had hurt the community the most and the longest. A third of a century later, after the 1857 Uprising, the Brits did another *volte-face*, this time putting limits on participation of the natives in colonial structures of power, while returning the Anglo-Indians a part of the favour that was earlier withdrawn from them. A parallel boost in the fortunes of the community came from the new

technologies that modernised colonial India — railways, the telegraph and all the massive changes that came in the wake of industrialisation. In a chapter titled “The Community's Romance with the Railways” O' Brien discusses the railway colonies, which, in fact, became one of the first organised settlements of the community. But what is clear is that the participation of Anglo-Indians in colonial India's tumultuous march to modernity, especially when it came to higher education, civil services, judiciary and medicine, remained limited. Also, the impact of the withdrawal of privileges so early in the day was never fully compensated through the remaining 150 years of British rule. Neither, for years, did the community as a whole come to any consensus about the nature of their belonging.

No wonder that the earliest migrations began in the latter half of the 19th century, when members felt that the best solution to their perpetual in-betweenness would be to find a new home in countries where every second person began their life anew. Canada and Australia were the natural choices. They cannot be said to have entirely miscalculated the chances because, as the book says, for another century policies and counter-policies were debated threadbare to locate a true space of belonging for the Anglo-Indians. Some of these debates, for example, the percentage of their legislative representation, are still raging. O' Brien writes, “Finally, on 9 December 2019, the Anglo-Indian community felt betrayed a second time by a government in power — the first was by the British in the build-up to Independence.” (p157) He is referring to the bill that went on to amend Article 334 of the Indian Constitution,

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which discontinued the nomination of an Anglo-Indian representative to the Indian Parliament.

So when Barry O' Brien's father, Neil O' Brien, one of its prominent members and a legendary teacher in his own right, compared their status to the homelessness of the Jews he was not overstating the case. In a 2002 address, he said:

I am happy to say that I have noticed a marked change in the attitude of the Anglo-Indians identifying themselves as Anglo-Indians. When people from a community are scattered all over, like the Jews who had what is known as the Great Diaspora, the scattering exile, it scatters people physically but unites them very strongly emotionally...which is why many Anglo-Indians are coming back in search of their roots. (p 136)

The politics of belonging of the Anglo-Indians takes up two-thirds of the book and O' Brien touches upon numerous debates, self-appraisals, counterpoints, proclamations, acts and juridical enactments, etc, which makes the narrative a tad text-bookish and tedious at times. But it also makes the book timely. There is no apparent urgency in this *longue durée* account of this mixed-race community and its mixed fortunes in the unfolding idea of a nation. So what is timely about it?

First, here is a classic example of how a ‘minority’ demographic encounters, suffers, and obliges the idea of a state, if not always a nation, through its chequered, exigent, restless history. Second, here is yet one more chronicle — dense with illustrations, populated with eccentrics, and textured with events — which brings to life the complex, colourful, cohabiting multitude that we call India; and why

the monolithic, insipid, egotistic imagination of a *single-origin* nation, as fantasised by the majoritarian right-wing, is completely antithetical to it. The second reason seems to be the primary, if unstated, reason why O' Brien has chosen to write this book, given that the last two grand histories of the community were published as recently as 2013: *Anglo-Indians: A 500-Year History* by S Muthiah and Harry Maclure (Niyogi Books); and *The Anglo-Indian Way: The Lives of Anglo Indians of India* by Errol O' Brien (Rupa Publications). To that end, the best takeaway from this book is that through the history of a comparatively ‘minor’ minority community of 4 lakh people in a total Indian population of 1.4 billion, there are lessons to be learnt which are wider in scale and sweep, especially in what is purportedly ‘New India’.

Expectedly, the best part of this book is not hidden in the lessons of history, but spread, like daylight, in public. Like so many communities otherwise invisibilised in the nation's mainstream narrative, the mark left by the Anglo-Indians in all spheres of the mosaic that is India is disproportionate to its size.

Think the security forces and especially the Indian Air Force: Air Chief Marshals Dennis La Fontaine and Norman Browne; Admiral Ronald Pereira, the first Anglo-Indian to head the Indian Navy (1979-1982); Mahavir Chakra recipient and 1965 war hero Desmond Hayde, amongst a long list of decorated officers. Writes O' Brien:

At the time of the 1965 and 1971 wars, about 20 per cent of the group captains and 30 per cent of the wing commanders were Anglo-Indians.

One must add the world of letters: Henry LV Derozio, Cedric Dover, Ruskin Bond, I Allan Sealy. The performing arts: Patience Cooper, Vivien Leigh, Pam Crain, Tony Brent. Sports: Wilson Jones, Gurney Nyss, Leslie Claudius, Neville Lazarus, Roger Binny. And even cuisine: Mulligatawny soup, fish meuniere, beef jhalfrzee, pishpash and pork ragout.

Think about the role of Anglo-Indian women who were the first to go out in search of employment. And remember some memorable, if sometimes stereotypical screen portrayals of Anglo-Indians: Uttam Kumar as the eponymous *Anthony Firingbee* (1967), Suchitra Sen as Rina Brown (*Saptapadi*, 1961), or Jennifer Kapoor as Violet Stoneham (*36, Chowringhee Lane*, 1981).

Indeed, the lonely, dedicated, Shakespearean teacher Violet Stoneham is the archetype of what can be called the keystone province of Anglo-Indian influence. From early on, the English language was its most reliable anchor in the state of existential flux that the community found itself in, which with time widened into a holistic investment in the whole culture of English education in the subcontinent. It remains the community's most salutary contribution, its “most precious gift to India”, as O' Brien says.

As this history reminds us all over again, the anxiety over ethnicity may have driven the Anglo-Indians, historically, towards the ambiguity of belonging, but the cultural life of the nation brims with the fullness of their large-hearted, endearing company. ■



Photograph by Arindam Mukherjee