

Colonial and Post-Colonial Hybridities: Eurasians in India

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Among the enduring legacies of the colonial encounter are any number of contemporary 'mixed-race' populations, descendants of the offspring of sexual unions involving European men (colonial officials, soldiers, traders, and so forth) and local women. This research concerns one such group, the Eurasians, or Anglo-Indians. Despite the withdrawal of the British from India, the community has persisted, shaped indelibly by its colonial heritage, yet also transformed by post-colonial circumstances.

By Lionel Caplan

During the centuries of Britain's imperial rule a substantial number of officers, soldiers, and civilians served the East India Company and, later, the Government of India. Men of diverse European nationalities – mainly British, but others as well – also came to trade or seek employment in various sectors of the colonial economy. Many established domestic relationships with Indian women, resulting in the birth of children and the emergence of a 'mixed-race' or 'hybrid' population. Eurasians, or Anglo-Indians as they were subsequently to be designated, settled mostly in and around urban centres like Madras (recently renamed Chennai), the locus of the present research. While we know that they descended from a medley of different national groups on the paternal side, it is virtually impossible to say more about the initial maternal progenitors other than that they were of disparate caste and religious origins. In time, their progeny intermarried and became aware of themselves as distinct from the surrounding Indian population, with a common language (English) and religion (Christianity), as well as other shared cultural attributes. The colonial government's fluctuating policies towards this group contributed to the economic distress of the majority, while recent developments have driven many further into poverty; only some have benefited from new opportunities in the post-colonial economy. Since India's independence, a significant proportion of Anglo-Indians – as many as half – have left India to settle in the West, chiefly Britain and Australia. Today, the Anglo-Indian population in India totals approximately 125,000,

with perhaps 10-15,000 resident in Madras. As in the past, they tend to be concentrated in particular neighbourhoods, generally in central areas of the city where their churches and schools are to be found. Recently, however, rising land costs and house rentals have propelled many into outlying suburbs, and led to greater dispersal of the community.

'Hybrid' groups, however demographically insignificant, invite serious scholarly attention because, among other things, they blur the divide between colonizer and colonized, questioning the very efficacy of these labels (Stoler 1989). Moreover, they not only underline the impossibility of viewing rulers and ruled as universal and undifferentiated categories, but question the analyst's treatment of Europeans and colonizers as synonymous. Such populations also beg a host of queries about continuities and transformations in the post-colonial world. How does a 'hybrid' community imagine and describe itself to others and to itself? How does it understand its past, contemplate its future, and live in the present? What practices does it posit as marking its 'culture' and so, its distinctiveness? What are the ingredients of this culture given the diverse origins of its population, and what changes in these cultural habits have occurred with the withdrawal of the colonial power? We cannot hope to attend to all of these questions here, although I have tried to do so elsewhere (see Caplan 2001). For the present it is important to inquire about the attitudes of the British to this 'mixed-race' population.

Colonial attitudes

Like similar 'mixed-race' groups in the colonized world, Anglo-Indians

were seen by their British rulers, at times, as potential enemies and, at others, as allies in their imperial adventure, alternately preferred and promoted or thwarted and victimized. This kind of oscillation was especially evident in the occupational realm; in the 'early' colonial period, Anglo-Indian males were relatively free to follow a range of activities. For a time from the end of the eighteenth century they were excluded from many civil and most military services under the government, but by the middle of the nineteenth century they were allowed favoured if restricted access to positions of intermediate responsibility in central government sectors (railways, telegraphs, customs, etc.) and, from the early years of the twentieth century, in the wake of nationalist pressures, they were increasingly exposed to competition from members of the wider society in virtually all areas of their 'traditional' employment spheres. These last developments exacerbated the extent of poverty within the Anglo-Indian fold but, at the same time, as women increasingly entered the workplace, this hardship was somewhat mitigated; for some decades now many households at the lower end of the class hierarchy have relied on women as the main providers, a factor which has profound implications for gender roles and relations within the community.

Thus, in the post-independence period Anglo-Indians have gradually lost the protected status they enjoyed in certain occupational niches, and have had to survive in an unsteady economic climate, increasingly subject to global influences which have, if anything, adversely affected those least educated and skilled. Without the protection afforded to 'scheduled castes' or 'backward classes' – who comprise the bulk of the disadvantaged in contemporary Indian society – the Anglo-Indian poor feel themselves to be suffering disproportionately. At the same time, the colonial ceiling which confined Anglo-Indians within certain work spaces lifted with the withdrawal of the British, and today there is a small but growing elite – highly educated, cosmopolitan, professional, and comfortably-off – which has become part of the larger upper middle class in India, and benefited from new liberalization and structural adjustment policies.

There is a wide consensus among scholars of colonialism in India that, from the end of the eighteenth century, a transformation occurred in the relationship between British rulers and those over whom they exercised dominion. The growth of 'scientific racism' in early nineteenth-century Europe saw the 'hybrid' become a trope for moral failure and degeneration, and led to the increasingly negative evaluation and status abasement of Anglo-Indians by British elites in India. Branded with a number of degrading epithets, they became figures of contempt and

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ridicule, and were seen as combining the worst qualities of both 'founding races'. These attitudes were reflected in English-language fiction about India, much of it written by colonial Europeans (Nabar and Bharucha 1994). In both life and fiction they were frequently portrayed in disparaging stereotypes, many of which focused on women, who were regarded as the principal mimics of European mores and seducers of their men.

Self-identification

Notwithstanding the Euro-colonial social practices and attitudes which distanced and demeaned this 'mixed-race'



population, those who spoke for and about Anglo-India – with only some exceptions – insisted, until very near the end of the colonial period, on unequivocal association with the dominant European group. Encouraged, no doubt, by their special privileges in employment and education (in comparison to other Indians), their common language of English and adherence to the Christian faith, and their inadvertent alignment with the political project of colonial rule, they identified themselves – in the idioms of blood and culture – to themselves and to others as unequivocally British, employing essentialist discourses which denied hybridity and proclaimed purity. At the same time, alongside colonial discourses associating themselves with their British rulers, Anglo-Indians paradoxically exhibited – a result of both external compulsion and internal

dynamic – a remarkable degree of self-awareness and group consciousness from at least the early nineteenth century. In spite of their disparate origins they came to regard themselves as possessing a distinct identity of their own (Hawes 1996).

From the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, when it became apparent that British rule in India was drawing to a close, increasingly voices were heard within the community urging alliance with the nationalist project. In the contemporary setting, Anglo-Indian elites, who share the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and cosmopolitan ambience of India's affluent, insist on a strong local connection. At the other end of the spectrum, among the most disadvantaged, enveloped in the surroundings of the poor, a variety of credentials are enunciated, as alternative forms of association become possible. It is principally within the middle ranks of Anglo-India, where economic uncertainties and 'downward mobility' have been most acutely felt, that claims to a European pedigree continue to be declared in contemporary Madras. These claims, however, either meet derision or fall on deaf ears both within the now dominant groups in Indian society, including the elites of their own community, and outside it, where they are meant to be heard by governments in the 'first world' assumed to be in search of culturally westernized immigrant populations.

Boundaries, identities, cultures

The post-colonial condition is frequently represented by its theorists as being characterized by, among other things, fluid boundaries, multiple identities, and creolized cultures. The implication is that contemporary ambiguities contrast with the clear-cut identities of the colonial period. This research questions the validity of such a distinction, insisting that these ambiguities have been a part of the colonial past as well. The efforts of European colonizers to demarcate subject populations were frequently undermined by the very people on whom they sought to impose their classifications, giving rise to porous boundaries and permeable groupings. For one thing, British census officials and the Anglo-Indian lead-



All photos by Lionel Caplan

Two portraits of Anglo-Indians.

When It Is Good To Be Bad

Medieval Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Apologetics

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When do you think it could be good to be bad? Had you met Hitler in a dark alley in Vienna in the 1920's, and been armed with infallible foresight, would it have been good to kill him, even though killing is otherwise bad?

By Isabelle Onians

This question is as apposite today as ever. By the time these words are published the concept of a pre-emptive strike may well have been pushed to its illogical limit as justification for invasion of a country which happens to encompass Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Not to mention that launching such an attack must rank highly as a cause for being attacked oneself.

Perhaps violence, for example, is more normal or normalized in some traditions than others. Yet to call an act normal is different from formulating the paradox that the abnormal is normal. Discussing various aspects of rules is not the same as envisaging a system which makes it the rule to break the rules: antinomianism as a norm.

Antinomianism comes in at least two forms: strong or weak. Weak antinomianism is permissive: one may do what is bad and nevertheless somehow remain not guilty. Strong antinomianism is normative: one is compelled to commit an offence, with the same impunity. Antinomianism as a norm is strong antinomianism: one is obliged to transgress.

From the beginnings of Buddhism, action has famously been defined as intention. It is not what you do, but the way that you do it, or why. That sounds like weak antinomianism. Provided one has the correct intention, slapping a child or ostracising an adult may be the best medicine. The corollary and, perhaps, the point is that coveting one's brother's wife is a crime, whether or not the seduction succeeds. When one has no choice but to be cruel, for someone's own good and that of others, then that is strong antinomianism.

For a Buddhist monk or a nun, however, rules and regulations are non-provisory. Their five fundamental precepts are equally binding for the laity: to refrain absolutely from killing, theft, sexual misbehaviour, lying, and intoxication by liquor. The single amendment for a monastic individual, or, temporarily, for a householder, is that the third is, effectively, the vow of sexual abstinence, *brahmacharya*.

Such are the rules which it must be the rule to break for us to have found our paradox. Logically impossible maybe, but that is precisely what Tantric Buddhism uses as self-definition. One scriptural verse is quoted countless times: what is a bond for fools – non-Tantrics – is the means to freedom from bondage for the wise – Tantric adepts.

Tantric Buddhism is notorious for this claim. The shock of first acquaintance with its practices has repeatedly discouraged modern inquirers, while the lure of forbidden pleasures has led many contemporary seekers to the religion, albeit in its radically bowdlerized present forms.

However, in medieval India and Tibet, between the eighth and eleventh centuries, when the ideas under consideration were undeniably gaining

institutional acceptance, who was shocked? What were the mores of Buddhists? Were they different from the ethics of proponents of other religions, and those in the secular world?

Before revealing one or two explicit examples of the normalized antinomianism we have so far only alluded to, the counter-intuitive data should be noted: the sheer volume of Victorian and modern vilification swamps the scarce evidence for attacks found in contemporary medieval sources.

Besides this remarkable imbalance, the tradition itself offers few deliberately theoretical apologetics. Given that Tantric Buddhists presented their system in powerfully paradoxical terms, this implies that they were conscious of the apparently bizarre nature of their practices. Were they not driven to make a reasoned defence against charges of moral delinquency, from within their own religion and without?

Tantric Buddhist authors were not overly concerned with apologetics, neither in the sense of regretfully excusing an offence or failure (to apologize), nor even in the paradigmatic sense of European texts offering ideological justification (apologias). Perhaps what was later labelled disgusting did not arouse such emotions at that time. Or, was the silence due to the absolute esotericism of the system?

Moreover, the obscure nature of this religion is, it should be noted, a real obstacle to any enquiry, including this. I have been threatened with what one might call the Valley of the Kings syndrome. In parallel to the torments explorers of Egyptian monumental tombs suffered last century, the study of Tantric texts is said to be potentially fatal, or lead, at the very least, to madness.

That is because their medicine is strong stuff, strong enough to be able to swiftly heal the entrenched ailment which is human suffering. Without the personality to withstand the treatment, disaster is inevitable. Only a teacher's consummate professional judgement can determine one's suitability. Without the guidance of a teacher, even reading the texts is firmly disallowed.

Accordingly, we will start where an aspirant to the religion would begin, with initiation, the point of transformation from being an outsider to belonging. The paradoxical employment of the afflictions (*klesas*) is ritualized in the second and third of the developed set of four initiations (*abhiṣekas*), found first in the eighth-century Guhyasamāja Yoga Tantra and then in all the Yoginī Tantras (Hevajratra et al.). The first initiation is a group of innocuous rites of preparation.

The second of the four is called the secret initiation (*guhyābhiṣeka*). This involves the teacher having sexual intercourse with a female consort. He places some of his semen on the student's tongue. The sources agree that the purification of speech is brought about by this act, the previous preliminary

package, with its provision of physical accoutrements, having purified the body.

The third is the wisdom-knowledge initiation (*prajñājnānābhiṣeka*). In it the student himself has intercourse with the consort. It is said in turn to purify the mind. The fourth is different, simply called the fourth (*caturtha*-), and consists of an explanation by the teacher of the nature of reality (*tattva*).

Evidently these two erotic events would be out of bounds for a monk, whether as candidate for initiation or teacher. One can cast monastics in these roles because of the second sense in which this antinomianism is as a norm.

Early Tantric practitioners appear to have rejected general morality. However, the method definitely became institutionalized. By the tenth and eleventh centuries eminent abbots of great monastic universities in India and Tibet were high-ranked proponents of the Tantric Buddhist way. Ratnākaraśānti, Abhayākara Gupta, and Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna are well-known exponents of this phenomenon of the normalization of antinomianism, and sophisticated advocates for, even, the contravention of the rules of monastic discipline.

In the writings of these men are answers to our flurry of questions: what happens when candidate or initiating master is a monk? From where did the female partners come, and could they be initiated on their own behalves? And, perhaps most crucial of all, what earthly function are these sensual relations supposed to serve on the path to enlightenment? What kind of causal relationship can one imagine between oral insemination and sexual intercourse on the one hand, and transcendent liberation on the other?

While illicit pleasures need not be sufficient conditions for spiritual release, if they are not necessary conditions then why ever take the risk of indulging them? Some claimed that this was a specialised strategy for pulling the attainment of enlightenment into the time-frame of one's present life, for instance, instead of leaving *nirvāṇa*, the remote if not unattainable goal on offer in many traditions.

This is not the place to analyse the apologetic details found in the writings of establishment commentators: namely, whether the initiations are sine qua non for a Tantric enlightenment; if so, whether monks can properly enact them with a substitute mind-made, virtual, and hence virtuous, consort, rather than with an incriminating woman of flesh and blood; how exactly, in that case, it is that the initiations are necessary; the connection between ontology and ethics such that if the phenomenal world is the illusion Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy demonstrates it to be, then no harm is really done; but then again, if so, why perform the passionate charade in the first place; and so on.

Sex is not the only or main manifestation of the religion's antinomianism.

It happens to be in immediate conflict with monastic celibacy as well as, in the component of oral insemination, with wider Indian norms of purity. The fact that it figures at such an early stage in initiation is unlikely to be pure chance.

Abhayākara Gupta explains the importance of the union when he asserts that the third initiation must be taken for full entitlement to higher Tantric practice. He appeals to the standard authorities, scripture and reason, to prove that without having experienced the innate reality which is the bliss of non-duality one cannot go on to discuss it in the fourth initiation. If we were to follow through his unspoken argument, it would thus be impossible to direct post-initiatory practice towards the goal of realizing that reality.

However, in Tantric Buddhism we find that a whole plethora of antisocial practices, including killing and violence, are the natural complement to sex.

Already in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in the centuries before the rise of Tantric Buddhism, such activities were, in certain circumstances, permitted for the bodhisattva, because he was a new type whose motivation was broadened to include the spiritual well-being of everyone alive. If we meditate again on a hypothetical meeting with a young Hitler, the threefold question is whether a bodhisattva: 1) could get away with murder; 2) would carry out the deed, because that is the kind of man he is; or finally 3) should do so since to do otherwise would be wrong. This last is our strong antinomianism: not only is it good to be bad; it would be bad to be good.

In Tantric Buddhism a different, homeopathic principle is at stake. Homeopathy refers to a treatment of disease which should produce the disease's symptoms. However, unlike the twentieth century medical tradition, Tantric Buddhism does not distil its drugs until there is nothing but shadows remaining in the medicine.

The disease in Buddhism is 'ignorance without beginning', in tandem with the other afflictions, passion and aversion, and their subsidiaries, pride and jealousy. The central triad can be reformulated as 'yes, no, and don't know'. The overwhelming symptom of the sickness is suffering (*duḥkha*). Dissatisfaction may be a better translation, because it is caused by our 'ignorance without beginning' of the one inescapable fact of life: impermanence.

Scriptural verses from the Hevajratra insist that fitting similes for the mysterious workings of Tantric Buddhism are that it is like someone with flatulence eating beans, or the fuller who uses clay ('dirt') to clean cloth. Thus, passion, aversion, and ignorance have become their own antidote. <

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ership were equally perplexed not only by the tendency for Anglo-Indians to declare themselves Europeans, but by the significant numbers of those apparently not deserving of an Anglo-Indian label who proclaimed themselves as such to the census takers. For another, marriage outside the group, especially at both extremes of the class spectrum, led to 'evaporation' out of and 'infiltration' into its ranks, resulting in extremely porous boundaries and fluid identities. The greater frequency of these external unions since independence has undoubtedly created new hybridities, increased the complexity of identity claims, and enhanced the possibilities for and range of such choices. Anglo-Indian women – mainly but not exclusively from better-off families – have continued to make marriages outside the Anglo-Indian fold, while many males from the least well-off families, denied connubium within the community, have been compelled to seek partners among the poor outside it.

Such fluidity is echoed in the cultural domain. Most Anglo-Indians insist that certain cultural habits – related especially to their kinship, religion, language, dress, food, and marriage regimes – are distinctive of their way of life, and differentiate them from other groups in the society. However, as we might expect, class location has an important impact on the practice of culture; people in the middle ranks clothe and feed themselves and celebrate their marriages in somewhat different ways from those at either end of the social order. Further, though widely perceived and even celebrated as unfailingly – and stereotypically – Western, Anglo-Indian ways of life have clearly been much influenced by cultural practices in their local surroundings, and increasingly so since India's independence, notwithstanding the impacts of westernization and globalization. The urban cultural milieu in which Anglo-Indians were and continue to be situated is therefore best viewed as creolized. Such an approach stresses the notion of a continuum, thereby acknowledging not only diversity within the group, but mutual influence and overlap between cultural groups, and hence Anglo-India's constant negotiation with 'mainstream' society and culture. In this sense, Anglo-Indians serve as both a factor in and a potent reminder of the fluidity of the urban social environment during the colonial no less than the post-colonial periods. <

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