Colonial and Post-Colonial Hybridities: Eurasians in India

By Lionel Caplan

D uring 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 myriad 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 further economic distress of the majority, while recent developments have driven many further into poverty; only some have benefited from new opportunities in further economic distress of the majority, while.

Eurasians were seen by their British rulers, at times, as potential enemy and, at others, as allies in their imperial adventure, alternately preferred and promoted or thwarted and victimized. This oscillation was resident 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 services (railways, telegraphs, customs, etc.) and, from the early years of the twentieth century, in the wake of nationalist pressures, they were encouraged to compete 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 has in some cases lifted the economic ceiling which confined Anglo-Indian females to demarcate subject populations to themselves and to others.

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 tope for moral failure and degeneration, and led to the increasingly negative evaluation and status attached to women of mixed race in Britain’s elites in India. Branding with a number of degrading epithets, they became figures of contempt and ridicule, and were seen as combining the worst qualities of both ‘founder races’. These attitudes were reflected in English-language fiction about India, much of it written by colonial Euro- peans (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 modes 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 internal 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 identities are enunciated, as alternative forms of association become possible. It is principally within the middle ranks of Anglo-India, where economic uncertainties and ‘backward mobility’ have been most acutely felt, that claims to a European pedigree continue to be declared in contemporary Madras. These claims, however, either meet denial 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 complex 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-
When It Is Good To Be Bad

Medieval Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Apologetics

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

By Isabelle Oeiras

This question is as obsolete today as it was in the past, but the words and concepts the precept of this act rooted in the Vedas, and published the concept of a pre-eminent strike may well have been pushed to its illogical limit as justification for inva- 
sion. Before reaching 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 delib-

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