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Calcutta as a Site of Post-colonial Identity Formation: Interactions and Experiences of the Anglo-Indian Community

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Abstract: *The Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta, a product of British colonial rule, occupies a unique cultural and social space within the city. Historically positioned between the British and Indian populations, they developed distinct identity markers such as the English language, Christianity, Western attire, and cuisine. However, their identity has never been static; rather, it has undergone significant transformations, particularly in postcolonial Calcutta. This paper explores how the Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta navigates its identity in a postcolonial urban landscape, engaging with issues of cultural hybridity, spatial belonging, and social adaptation. Through an ethnographic lens, the study examines the evolving identity markers of Anglo-Indians in the city, highlighting the impact of migration, cultural assimilation, and interactions with the dominant Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities. Everyday spaces such as neighbourhoods, churches, schools, and workplaces serve as sites where their identity is negotiated and performed. The paper discusses how language use, dress patterns, food habits, and social practices reflect a process of adaptation and localisation while still retaining elements of their colonial heritage. It also addresses how the challenges of identity labelling and stereotyping influence both internal self-perception and external social integration. Drawing from postcolonial theories and urban ethnography, the study argues that the Anglo-Indian identity in Calcutta is neither fixed nor easily defined. Instead, it remains fluid, shaped by historical legacies, contemporary social realities, and individual agency.*

Keywords: Anglo-Indians, Postcolonial City, Urban Landscape, Everyday Spaces, Identity Navigation, Cultural Hybridity.

Who are the Anglo-Indians of Calcutta?

Classified by Coralie Younger as the 'neglected children' of the British Raj in her 1987 study, the Anglo-Indians originated in India in the seventeenth century. Western expansion through trade and colonial rule brought European powers to India, beginning with the Portuguese, followed by the French, and ultimately, most significantly, the British. Colonialism was primarily a male-dominated enterprise. In the case of the British in India, thousands of unmarried men spent years away from their homeland, during which many of them formed relationships with local women. These unions led to the emergence of the first Anglo-Indians. Section 366 (2) of the 1935 Government of India Act defines Anglo-Indians as:

> 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.
>
> [Citizenship Act No.: LV11 of 1955]

In the earliest days of their existence, they were treated as if they were *Pure British*[1]. After some time, the British began to distinguish themselves from Anglo-Indians. One result of this is that Anglo Indians came to form themselves into a distinct community over this period. Fears and insecurity about their future in India led to the first of three major waves of migration from India. From 1949, tens of thousands left for England, which they had always considered as a homeland. Robyn Andrews, in her 2005 Ph.D. thesis (2005), discussed the characteristics that differentiate Anglo-Indians from other communities in India, including having English as their mother tongue (the All-India Anglo-Indian Association argues that this characteristic is crucial to their identification as Anglo-Indians), acknowledging their historical link to Europe, and being Christians. They frequently dress in Western clothing, enjoy (spiced-up) Western food, and employ Western eating practices, and usually have European names. In terms of appearance, Anglo-Indians range from being fair to swarthy. One of the important legacies of India's colonial past was the emergence of a community of mixed racial heritage. They still survive as one of the racial-linguistic minority communities of India. Although referred to by different names with varying connotations, this community received political recognition as a minority in independent

India. Its 'native' status was confirmed in 1911 during British rule, along with its name: 'Anglo-Indian'. (Andrews, 2005: 3–4)

The cultural distinctiveness of Anglo-Indians has manifested in various facets of their lives. In terms of appearance, Anglo-Indians range from being fair to swarthy. These groups insisted that they were Europeans, but British society laughed at their **'***chee-chee'* accent and ridiculed them for speaking of a 'home' they had never seen (Sen, 2016: 45). This term is often confused with 'Bengalee Christian'. They were initially known as Eurasians. The term 'half-caste' was also used to refer to them. Some, particularly postcolonial scholars, consider them a 'hybrid' community. Their name suggests this, but Caplan prefers to regard them, after over three hundred years, as distinctive in themselves rather than being a mixed-race and culturally composite community (2001: 4–6). In this paper, I demonstrate that despite facing identity labelling and enduring stereotypes, the lived experiences of the Anglo-Indian community reflect an ongoing process of identity navigation, where they redefine their place in contemporary Calcutta. As a historically hybrid community, their identity remains fluid, shaped by both their colonial past and the socio-cultural transformations of postcolonial India, ensuring their continued presence in the city's multicultural fabric.

City as a Site of Encounter

The city of Calcutta, with its deep historical roots and vibrant cultural milieu, offers a compelling setting to explore the nuanced experiences of the Anglo-Indian community. Within this dynamic city, Anglo-Indians have maintained elements of their unique cultural identity while simultaneously navigating the shifting tides of contemporary Indian society. The interplay of historical tradition and modern influences in Calcutta creates an ideal context to understand how Anglo-Indians adapt and redefine their sense of self. In this context, the Anglo-Indian experience exemplifies the complexities involved in forming a cultural identity within a hybrid social landscape. Their everyday decisions - ranging from the languages they speak and the foods they eat to the clothes they wear and the education they pursue - illustrate a constant balancing act between honouring their Anglo-Indian roots and engaging with the broader, multicultural environment of urban Calcutta, as it was called until recent times.

This city's environment, or 'habitat' that the Anglo-Indians grow up in, both

as individuals and collectively, is complex and layered. One of the aims of this work is to convey an impression of the reality of life for Anglo-Indians living in Calcutta in the twenty-first century. Growing on both banks of the Hooghly River, it was first settled for its potential as a trading port. In 1772, Calcutta became the capital of British India when the first governor general, Warren Hastings, transferred all important offices to the city from Murshidabad, and from 1772 to 1911, it remained British India's administrative Centre. English visitors to late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Calcutta asserted that there was a '*White Town*' as well as a '*Black Town*'. The former was represented by the fine rows of houses surrounding the maidan, while its counterpart, the black town, seemed to be situated somewhere beyond. (Chattopadhyay, 2000: 154–155)

The population distribution of the different ethnic groups in the various localities undoubtedly shifted between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but any strict demarcation was arbitrary. Such boundaries are quite fluid; at no time did the white town form a homogeneous space for the European inhabitants. The actors living in there are not always black and white but mixed: they were called half-caste, Eurasian, and Anglo-Indians (King, 1974: 88). He also identifies that the political-administrative terms between the dominant and dependent societies are reflected in the latter by a set of terms applied to the socio-spatial areas of the colonial metropolis. Hence, the idea of colonial urbanity encompasses not only physical and spatial characteristics but also distinct social attributes. This culture reflects a learned form of social organisation, a specific set of values, behaviours, and lifestyles that are unique to colonial communities. Even before such boundaries were drawn, Indian and European investors bought large tracts of land and built on them, anticipating a wide range of uses and renters. They invested in *bazaars*, warehouses, residential buildings, shops, bustees, *godowns* and garden houses. The commercial and administrative activity in the city had attracted approximately 200,000 inhabitants by 1820, by which time landed property had become a lucrative business.

To perceive a city from the ethnographic lens, we need to prepare a conceptual model of social reality with which all phenomena are perceived, processed, and organised into a cognitive whole. This involves identifying how individuals describe and construct their lived experiences. A postcolonial city often serves as a dynamic space where identity claims are asserted by urban local governments and various social groups, making it a site of

encounters with difference (Bonnerjee, 2010: 35). Every day spaces within such cities are shaped by interactions, locality, and the cultural practices of their inhabitants. These spaces have been studied in the context of urban India, emphasising the ways individuals understand their environments both spatially, spiritually, and symbolically.

The postcolonial city is characterised as a specific space that exists simultaneously in material and imagined dimensions. The concept of 'ordinary' or everyday lived spaces becomes crucial, as these spaces facilitate overlapping lives and interactions between diverse communities. For the Anglo-Indian community, everyday spaces like neighbourhoods are critical sites where their identity intersects with the identities of Bengalee Hindu and Bengalee Muslim communities, with whom they share habitats. This interaction creates a sense of coexistence and distinction, influencing their identity as a mixed-race community. Bonnerjee employs two primary perspectives to shape the understanding of these spaces in the city. The first relates to transnationalism and translocalism, examining how these forces influence everyday urban life (2010: 31). The second perspective focuses on encounters within the city, particularly the interactions between different communities within shared spaces. In the Indian context, neighbourhoods: *para, mohalla, wadi, bazaa*r - are not merely physical but are imbued with historical, cultural, and symbolic meanings. During colonial times, neighbourhoods were often sites of resistance and contestation against colonial impositions. Masselos describes these spaces as 'accustomed spaces', where festivals and communal practices challenged the colonial order and reasserted local identities. For mixed-race communities like Anglo-Indians, these everyday spaces play a pivotal role in identity formation (1991: 39–40). Neighbourhoods act as arenas where cultural hybridity is negotiated and performed, blending elements of colonial legacies with local influences. The shared space of neighbourhoods fosters encounters that shape and reshape the Anglo-Indian identity, connecting them to both colonial histories and contemporary urban life in India.

Since the postcolonial city is a site where claims of Identity are put forward by urban local governments as well as different social groups. Now, we will try to understand how people describe their own world of experience, and this is how they tend to configure it. A space of encounter with difference. How the idea of everyday space is related to interaction, locality (*Para*) and how the everyday space has been studied in relation to Urban India.

Their milieu has been understood simultaneously in spatial, spiritual and symbolic terms. The 'postcolonial' in the 'urban' emphasises the importance of the city as a specific space with material and imagined dimensions.

The idea of 'ordinary' spaces or everyday lived spaces in the city is an important theme around which they navigate their identity. These spaces create a sense of overlapping lives for the Anglo-Indian community with the other two communities, i.e. the Bengali Hindus and Muslims, with whom they share their habitat. The first relates to the idea of everyday space in the city within literature on colonialism, postcolonialism and trans localism, while the second engages with the idea of encounter within the city. The city is being 're-imagined as a site of connection'. I would like to emphasise that the idea of encounter, as discussed within the literature on postcolonialism, has often been analysed through the neighbourhood in the context of everyday space in the city. The neighbourhood as a spatial unit is an important part of the Indian city, as shown by the use of a wide range of words- *mohalla, wadi, bazaar, chawl, para-* in common parlance. In this literature, everyday space in the colonial city has been viewed as a space of resistance and contestation. Masselos, for example, writes of the neighbourhood as 'an accustomed space' which, as a site for festivals, was a means to contest the imposition of the coloniser's idea of urban space. From this space, only the identity formation starts for a person who belongs to a mixed race (1991: 39).

The Process of Identity Navigation and Labelling

Postcolonial identities are not static; rather, they are unceasingly developing and culturally cross-national. The ex-colonials embrace the multiple and often conflicting aspects of blended culture that are theirs, and that is an ineradicable fact of history (Tyson, 1999). They used to develop their own literature on history, traditions, and interpretations. Postcolonial cultures include a merger of both the culture of the colonisers and that of the colonised. The cultural patterns 'created or learnt' are, in the first place, generally shared by representatives of each of the two cultures in context. This is difficult to identify and separate, ranging from the British intrusion into the government, education, cultural values, and daily lives of its colonial subjects. Interestingly, after independence, they are also influenced by the wider Bengalee community with whom they now share their neighbourhood.

The idea of Identity Navigation denotes the change and constancy in Identity formation across time, which involves the process of differentiating the self, which can be as same or different from the former self. Those are related to a healthier sense of life. (Knutz et al., 2020: 393). A community's identity is defined through the common interests, and the shared experience of its users shapes various facets of the social dynamics within it. The Anglo-Indians now have almost three generations in postcolonial Calcutta. Cultural navigation occurs through language, food habits and the style of dressing, although their ethno-cultural history has a great impact on their internal dynamics.

Language*:* During my fieldwork, most of my respondents were fluent in Hindi. Sometimes they speak Bengali, which they find an easy medium to communicate with friends and colleagues. According to them, they know Hindi as they used to have it as a subject in their school days. Anglo-Indians often watch Hindi and Tamil movies. A few of them watched Bengali movies as well. They know the names of the Bollywood heroes, and a few of them know Ray (Satyajit Ray) significantly.

Dress: Elderly Anglo-Indian Women are more inclined to wear Western dresses, although young women often wear Indian Outfits. A lady who started to stay in Calcutta just after independence, doing a job as an accountant in an office at Dalhousie, was refused to wear a skirt-blouse or dress at the workplace and instead was instructed to wear a *Salwar kameez*. The residents of Beniapukur, or picnic garden, said that they can't wear Western dresses in their locality. A 41-year-old lady told me that the dress that needed to be worn for the mass in church should be western, but she started to wear a Salwar as she found it so comfortable wearing a western dress while taking a rikshaw from her neighbourhood to go to the church. Not only do Anglo-Indians think of themselves as being attached to particular parts of the city, but also, it is clear that clothing is a distinctive marker for them. 'Covering faces with a *dupatta* is essentially a part of indigenous culture, but some elderly women in church are used to do that these days', - Susane (goes to St. Teresa Church, Maulali) told me that. The habit of wearing *Payel* or '*Mehendi*' is also observed among Anglo-Indian women nowadays. Probably these are the ways Anglo-Indians have blended their identity, formerly with the empire and latterly with the wider Bengali community in Calcutta. If we look at the post-colonial presence of the Anglo-Indian community, we can notice that they have Indianized themselves to

get acceptance in the contemporary framework.

Food Habits*:* 'Food habit depends on availability,' said Sonia-a resident of Beniapukur. 'We have our own cuisines like jhalfrezi, Junglee pulao and coconut rice, pork vindaloo. But we are used to having it on certain occasions. We are likely to be Anglo-Indians, but there is little touch of continental-which is a compulsion too.' Along with several kinds of meat, Anglo-Indians have Dal, Chappatti, and Carb in their daily meals. Few of them find '*khichdi-bhog'* (Bengali Porridge offered in several rituals) as a tasty meal. '…But to remember our roots, we often 'anglicised' a few words, like my grand mom pronounces Daal as Dol', Said Rossane. All these findings indicate that they are adapting their food habits. The local food culture of Calcutta has a great impact on that. The change often depends on the availability of food ingredients.

Historically recognised as a distinct community due to their European origin and Westernised customs, the cultural identity of Anglo-Indians has evolved significantly over time. While their colonial heritage once closely associated them with British rule, the post-independence era has seen them gradually adapt and integrate into the broader Bengali society.

Throughout our lives, people attach labels to us, and those labels reflect and affect how others think about our identities as well as how we think about ourselves. Since the Anglo-Indians are a minority community and their numbers are decreasing in Calcutta, the broader Bengali neighbourhood has never fully integrated with them but instead formed an abstract perception of their identity. These perceptions often lead to identity labelling. We regularly apply labels to people whom we barely know or have never even met, and the same is done to us. Thus, for good or for bad, labels represent an influence on our identity that is often beyond our control. Labels are not always negative; they can reflect positive characteristics, set useful expectations, and provide meaningful goals in our lives. (Bernburg, 2009: 189).

A respondent of mine from St. Xavier's college told me that she often gets comments like 'you are not like other Anglo-Indians' as she holds a role in college, was shy, less talkative and disciplined. The prevalent notions regarding Anglo-Indians are to be bubbly, be the last benchers and bunkers, be exclusively dressy, wear dark eye shadows and lipsticks. 'Basically, we are really accepted in this community (the wider Bengali society) because

we are very fun-loving, open, and straightforward. They like our outgoingness, and we are very frank with people. That's why they are more culturally shocked.' Felicia, a respondent of Picnic Garden, told me in an interview. If a person has certain expectations for a person of another race, they will treat them accordingly, which might position this person in a place fitting of the stereotype they're believed to fit under. And also, the 'Stereotype threat' refers to the concern that one's actions may fulfil a negative cultural stereotype of one's group. Such concerns may, paradoxically, lead to the fulfilment of those stereotypes.

According to Chantal Mouffe, postcolonial identity is relational, and the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity that is the perception of something 'other' than it, which will constitute its exterior. Then, we can begin to understand why such a relationship may always become a terrain of antagonism. For Mouffe, the modern reason must accept its constraints and regard the human subject not as persistent, single, essential, and true but as a changing and fluid, forming creature, product of power relations and the interaction with the constructing other (1992: 28). Initially, the Anglo-Indians strongly aligned themselves culturally with the British Empire rather than with India. While doing the fieldwork, I have noticed a generational difference in this case. Anglo-Indians of the older generation consistently dressed in Western attire, enjoyed Western music, and maintained a certain social distance from the Bengalee community, often considering themselves as 'somewhat superior to them.' However, the younger generation appears to be more pragmatic in this regard. One of my respondents expressed this shift in perspective by saying, 'My Aadhaar card is Indian, my voter ID is Indian, and I have to find employment in India– so how can I think of myself as anything other than an Anglo-Indian?' Unlike their predecessors, younger Anglo-Indians are more open to cultural integration with the Bengalee community. They actively learn vernacular languages and participate in local festivals such as *Durga Puja* and *Diwali*. Many young Anglo-Indian women have embraced Indian attire, filling their wardrobes with ethnic clothing. Additionally, inter-community marriages have become increasingly common, driven in part by the declining Anglo-Indian population in Kolkata.

These generational differences offer insight into how ideas of identity evolve. Empires have historically played a central role in shaping and often fragmenting the identities of both the rulers and the ruled. Through cultural,

linguistic, and social impositions, imperial powers frequently marginalised indigenous traditions and self-perceptions. Yet, the experience of empire also sparked resistance, which in turn fuelled the emergence of national and cultural identities among colonised peoples. For the Anglo-Indian community, both alignment with and resistance to imperial legacies have shaped their evolving sense of self, where older generations leaned toward cultural continuity with the British Empire, and younger generations are forging hybrid identities rooted more firmly in contemporary Indian realities.

Hence, there might not be any authentic identity that ought to be explored, developed and liberated. While talking about modern democracy, Mouffe pointed out in her book *The Democratic Paradox*, that '…radical implications of the pluralism of values (in its strong Nietzschean or Weberian version) and with the impossibility of a total harmony that modernity frees itself from its pre-modern heritage. An 'ethical' perspective is– potentially at least - more conducive to apprehending the limits of reason and to conceptualising the plurality of values …' (2000: 133–134). Here, she identifies pluralism as a defining feature of modern society, one that naturally leads to fluidity.

Identity is inherently fluid, shaped by pre-existing social conditions, whether one is consciously aware of it or not. The Anglo-Indian community never actively sought to construct a distinct identity of their own, yet they constantly grappled with a sense of in-betweenness and a search for belonging. Andrews, in an article published in 2005, observed that they were often uncertain about their roots; a sentiment also echoed by Laura Bear in her study of the Anglo-Indians in Kharagpur Railway Colony (2000). This state of in-betweenness may have contributed to their gradual integration into the larger Bengalee society. While colonial narratives once positioned them as a liminal group, their present-day identity reflects a complex interplay of memory, belonging, and cultural negotiation. By situating the Anglo-Indians within the broader framework of postcolonial urbanism, this paper contributes to the understanding of how historically hybrid communities continue to evolve within changing socio-political landscapes.

Conclusion

Indian Independence in 1947 had led to a sense of deep unease about their future in India, which resulted in a significant trend of migration from the

community to English-speaking Commonwealth countries. The Western lifestyle of those remaining in India is now threatened by a combination of the loss of a critical mass, the introduction of Hindu nationalist policies, and the integration of Anglo-Indians with other Indian populations (Andrews, 2010: 173). The product of power relations and interaction with human otherness will negate the adverse role of the other and demonstrate to the human subject that they are always affected by others and affect them.

In this way, the Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta, shaped by its colonial past, continues to navigate its identity in a postcolonial urban landscape. Historically perceived as a distinct group due to their European ancestry, English language, and Westernised customs, their cultural positioning has undergone significant shifts over time. While their colonial legacy once linked them closely to British rule, post-independence realities have led to a process of adaptation and integration with the larger Bengalee society. This is evident in their evolving language use, food habits, dress, and participation in local traditions, demonstrating a nuanced negotiation between preserving their Anglo-Indian heritage and embracing new cultural influences.

Note

1. The term *'Pure British',* often heard in Anglo-Indian vocabulary, is used to describe individuals from the United Kingdom, usually characterised by fair skin and blue eyes.

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