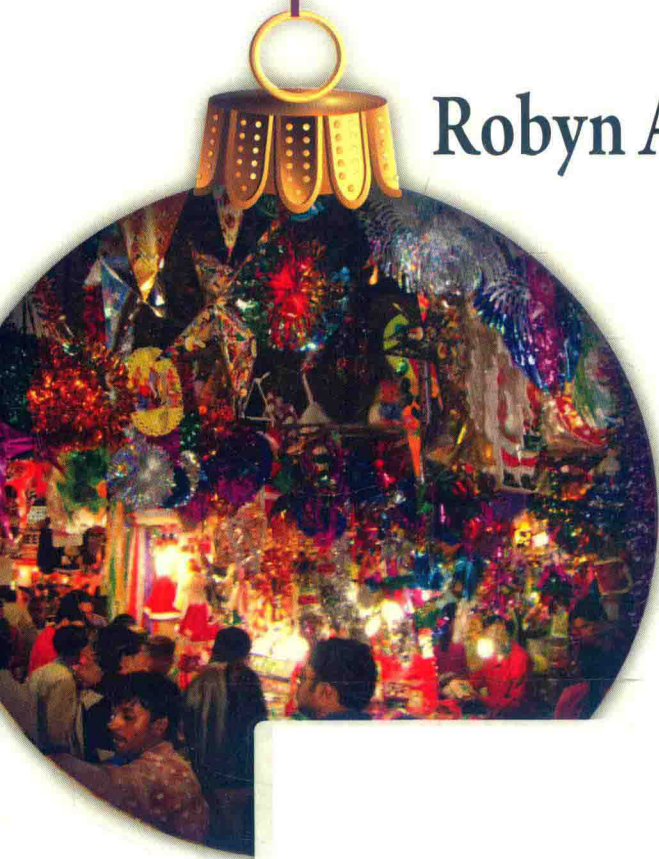


Foreword by Irwin Allan Sealy

Christmas *in* Calcutta

Anglo-Indian Stories and Essays

Robyn Andrews



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Christmas in Calcutta

For Anglo-Indians of Calcutta, particularly Keith.

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Foreword

Calcutta bears a disproportionate burden of colonial history, a burden it once carried with pride. With the transfer of power to Delhi that pride was shaken, and would have passed through a number of stages, from disbelief to the consolations of philosophy. The city's decline is now a hundred years old: for most of the 20th century its past was more attractive than any present it could manufacture, encouraging a culture of regret, if not denial. It was Satyajit Ray's genius to capture, and resist, this backward glance.

If the Bengali is forever looking over his shoulder, the Calcutta Anglo-Indian can be forgiven for stopping in his tracks to turn all the way round. After all, the grey man's burden, and his loss, is a fraction heavier. A community that lost half its numbers overnight at Independence and more than half the remainder over the rest of the century is bound to be disoriented. The present author is only the latest observer to lament the lack of critical mass for those who remain. Only the Jews of Calcutta have disappeared more completely from the local scene.

The marvel then is that those Anglo-Indians who remain preserve such good cheer. The lives of 10 of these are presented in Robyn Andrews' book, told for the most part in their own words. And while many cast a nostalgic look back, they are mostly too busy with the present to regret the loss of those who fled. They range across every station of life, from company secretaries and politicians to slum-dwellers and students: middle-class, rich, poor. Armed with a tape recorder and empathy the author has captured their voices and something of their daily lives. Her gaze is that of an outsider, new to the city and country, but returning repeatedly in the role of a committed participant. Rather than aiming for the imagined neutrality of social science, Robyn Andrews has sensibly allowed her sympathies to be engaged and her own life to colour

the picture; she has also steered clear of the jargon that renders much academic work unreadable. She shares her preconceptions and prejudices with the reader and brings to bear in addition certain insights from the Maori experience of her native New Zealand, a slant I would have wished to see widened. Private eye or public anthropology, the result is a gallery of fascinating individuals making the best of the hand dealt them in the city of their ancestors.

Anglo-Indians, as the author notes, are invisible in the national imagination. It is hardly surprising then that scholars looking at the role of English in India should overlook the fact that a community of native speakers exists, even if some of them are actually illiterate. Andrews argues for a zero-illiteracy drive and this goal is not impracticable; parenting, she is willing to hazard, has improved when it comes to the schooling of poor Anglo-Indian children. She also bravely suggests an amendment to the definition of an Anglo-Indian (which the Constitution currently restricts to European lineage through the male line), arguing that there is often good reason to include the maternal line, as the case of the subject called Irene so clearly demonstrates.

Despite destitution at the bottom end of the scale and the steady trickle abroad of emigrants, we are left with a picture that is not disheartening. This has something to do with the author's engagement with the community, whether in old people's homes where lives of incident and interest are winding down or on the campus of Birkmyre hostel where young graduates are gearing up. The story of Philip, whose earnings (at a call centre where he is repeatedly adjudged the best caller) make a quantum difference to his family's quality of life, is a good counter to the author's own doubts as to whether English has brought any professional advantage to the community. Stories such as this should be widely disseminated in the community, and I would urge all principals of Anglo-Indian schools to make them available to their students.

A census of the community is urgently required, as the Anglo-Indian former member of legislative assembly (MLA) for West Bengal, Barry O'Brien, has remarked. I would suggest in addition a vigorous push to collect the oral history of the community through a recording of Anglo-Indian voices by all interested persons, and not

just in the city of Calcutta. This would not only preserve individual life stories, but serve as a record of Anglo-Indian speech patterns, slang and every kind of idiom; the results could be housed at the proposed Centre for Anglo-Indian Studies at Calcutta University. Such a collection would be a valuable resource for future study while giving the community, as Robyn Andrews has wisely done, the last word.

Irwin Allan Sealy

Author of *The Trotter-Nama*

Preface

Calcutta is a city I always look forward to returning to. Its sensory intensity gets to me every time: chapattis being dry-fried on *chulas*, heat haze on my calves as I walk past corn being grilled on coal fires, the wafts of toasted flour. However, it's the human interaction, as warm as the climate, which keeps me coming back: the beggar woman who offered me a paan, the child picking a posy of flowers out of rubbish to give to his little friend, complete strangers wishing me Merry Christmas in Park Street during the festive season. In particular though, it's the Anglo-Indian community that draws me back, professionally and personally.

From the many months of field research I've spent in the company of Anglo-Indians in Calcutta I have previously written an ethnographic account as a social anthropology doctoral thesis. I've also written articles for academic journals. My intention with this more expanded work is to reach a wider audience of interested Anglo-Indians and Indians, as well as others interested in the community. I have combined research with storytelling by including memoir pieces, Anglo-Indian life stories (In order to capture the individual characteristics and styles of speaking I have drawn on large sections of interview material with minimal changes in their storytelling. Some of these stories have been presented as interviews and others as biographies.) and short research-based essays. Through this blend of literary styles, with the emphasis on stories, I hope to explore the nuanced lives of Anglo-Indians and the diverse ways of Anglo-Indian being. I draw attention to their place in the life of the nation, arguing against narratives of their near invisibility in the national imagination. Those who already know about Anglo-Indians and are familiar with the stereotypes and the view that they are fading away or losing their identity might be surprised by what they read!

I've organised the book into four parts: identity, faith, education and community care, which are all of concern and significance to the community. Each of these four parts includes an essay outlining the issues, and several life stories that illustrate pertinent facets in the lives of particular Anglo-Indians. None of the 10 life stories I've included are so neat as to illustrate only the issue they're linked to though. And they are not included just to illustrate issues; they also provide a window into what it means to be a contemporary Anglo-Indian living in Calcutta. Stories have a power and a magic that other prose does not. In keeping with this conviction I have included other 'stories' also. In line with the make-up of the four parts of the book, the introduction is also a compilation of separate parts: part one is a narrative, or story, which introduces me as the researcher-cum-storyteller; part two introduces the context and content of the book in essay style, and part three is a story that introduces Calcutta at Christmas time.

A question is regularly asked of me: how I, a Pakeha¹ New Zealand woman, became involved in this research. I always welcome this inquiry as 21st century anthropologists are required to reflect explicitly on their relationship to the research, and to identify biases, prejudices and the expectations they had have, which could impact upon the research. The short answer I've given to that regularly posed query is that my family has supported children from Dr Graham's Homes for many years and I became interested in the community through this sponsorship. Anglo-Indians have a culture of gifting and care for the 'less fortunate' of their community (Caplan, 1996, 1998) and, hence, this response is generally readily accepted. The fuller answer is that a series of events and coincidences have slowly but surely captivated me about India and its people to the point that it's now become something of a magnificent obsession affecting my private and professional life. The following narrative, which describes the early part of this journey, is drawn from memory, my diary, photographs and in places it has been 'corrected' by my daughters' memories.

¹Pakeha is defined variously but refers to non-indigenous New Zealanders, as opposed to, but in relation with, the indigenous Maori.

Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of more than a decade of research with Calcutta's Anglo-Indian community. The fulfilling and enjoyable experience it became was because of the hallmark hospitality of numerous Anglo-Indians in Calcutta. I am grateful to so many people, many of whom have become firm and cherished friends. The 10 Anglo-Indians: Philomena Eaton, Michael Robertson, Barry O'Brien (former MLA of West Bengal) and other pseudo-named Anglo-Indians, whose life stories are included, took a leap of faith in entrusting their stories to me and I am forever indebted to them. I am also thankful to others who helped me to better understand Calcutta's Anglo-Indians, including Theo Baker, Melvyn Brown, members of Calcutta Anglo Indian Service Society (CAISS) and other Anglo-Indian-focused organisations, MLAs past and present and their families, the Mantosh families, and those exceptional managing committees, staff and residents of various Anglo-Indian homes and hostels in the city.

Without the support from Massey University, New Zealand, this work would not have been possible. As well as providing me with a milieu of scholarship, collegiality and friendship, I received generous funding for several fieldwork trips and was released from teaching for a full semester in order to write.

I have been very fortunate to be part of another group of academics whose research focuses on the community. Over the time I've spent researching for and writing this work there have been opportunities to meet and explore ideas in Melbourne in 2004, Toronto and Calcutta in 2007, Perth in 2010 and in Calcutta again in 2013. I am particularly grateful for the friendship, lively discussions and critiquing from scholars too numerous to mention all by name but including: Rochelle Almeida, Alison Blunt, Jayani Bonnerjee, Adrian Carton, Kathy Cassity, Geraldine Charles, Uther Charlton-Stevens, Rosinka Chaudhuri, Dolores Chew, Glen D'Cruz,

Margaret Deefholts, Mark Faassen, Nigel Foote, Paul Harris, Sheila James, Alan Johnson, Richard Johnson, Michael Ludgrove, Dorothy McMenamin, Vinisha Nero, Deborah Nixon, Anjali Roy, Cheryl-Ann Shivan, Sudarshana Sen, Jayeeta Sharma, Blair Williams, and more recently from Anannya Chakroborty and Catherina Moss who are in the early stages of their own Anglo-Indian-focused research. Included in this group, but requiring special thanks, is Brent Howitt Otto, who, as we worked on other projects in Calcutta discussing observations, made perceptive remarks which influenced portions of this work. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge Lionel Lumb, with his vast experience of journalism, generously provided advice at the final stages of writing. I am extremely appreciative of Lionel's contribution.

The team at SAGE India has been efficient and professional, making it a pleasure to work with them. From the earliest phases I appreciated their enthusiasm and confidence in the work. Comments from reviewers aided me in producing a better finished product. Three pieces included in this work have been published earlier in slightly different forms. I am grateful to the reviewers' comments on earlier versions and acknowledge their previous publications as: 'English in India: Reflections based on fieldwork among Anglo-Indians in Calcutta' in *India Review* (Andrews, 2006b), 'Living and working in Calcutta: Jane's Story' by in *Working Women: Stories of Strife, Struggle and Survival* (Andrews, 2009) and 'Christianity as an Indian Religion: The Anglo-Indian Experience' in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (Andrews, 2010).

Others closer to home must also be acknowledged: friends who were always interested in what I was doing beyond being polite, and asked to read pieces of work, and colleagues who listened to presentations, read papers and offered insightful and valuable suggestions. Of these, two in particular stand out: first, Noeline Arnott who read each of the stories and essays as they were written and proof read the entire work. Noeline spent a fortnight in Calcutta with me very early in the research and developed an affection for the people she later read about. Second, Henry Barnard, my PhD supervisor and friend. He and his family were travelling companions to India, and Henry maintained an enthusiasm for the work I was engaged in and provided advice that was always of value.

Then there's my family: my adventurous siblings, Peter, David, Kay and Shelley, and my gorgeous daughters, Rochelle, Carolyn, Jane and Heather, all of whom love India. I thank them for the various roles they have played and continue to play: travel companions, encouraging listeners to my latest plans and ideas, and always wonderful company. I also thank my sister-in-law, Colleen, stepson David and sons-in-law Stefan and Rob for their affection, interest and involvement.

Most significant in the production of this work is Keith. He has contributed uniquely and enormously to this book, and my life, academically and personally. Thank you for everything.

Introduction

Serendipity: How I Went to India for a Holiday and Fell into a Research Topic

Twenty-eight December 1996 marked my first day ever in India. My grandfather had left money in his will for all of his grandchildren; mine was spent on five return fares to Madras. We had been planning this trip for more than a year and, finally, we had arrived—a married couple with three daughters: 8-year-old Jane, 10-year-old Carolyn and 16-year-old Rochelle. Bags lying flattened on the floor had been packed, and repacked, for weeks beforehand. We had travelled light—with just two packs between the five of us. I didn't count my worry bag filled with concerns about health, safety, transportation and public toilets. Friends had cautioned me about the trip, 'I know it's your dream but is it fair on your girls?' They were particularly worried about Jane, my frailty built, very fair and pretty eight-year old. A couple of friends even offered to look after the two younger girls while we went. Reassuringly my siblings only encouraged us—and three out of four of them had spent time in the subcontinent during their OE¹ years so they ought to know.

I'd woken early that first morning—too excited, or anxious, to sleep once the room began to lighten. I'd been impatient for the rest of the family to wake up but had reminded myself of the deal I'd made the night before—that they could sleep in. As I lay in the bed waiting for the rest of the family to wake up I heard what I came to recognise as the distinct early morning sound of India: strange bird calls, the occasional voice, traffic sounds beginning, a prolonged swish of the grounds being swept clean of all traces of the day before. These were the sounds I missed months later, back

¹ This is a New Zealand colloquialism for 'overseas experience'.

in New Zealand. We'd come to India through a sense of adventure but in those early days we were still affected by warnings of what we might experience.

Over the next few days we ventured out more and more confidently, retreating back to our hotel room only when we needed a break from the heat, the polluted air that irritated our throats and the unfamiliar and sometimes upsetting sights—such as women begging with small children on their hips and children sleeping on the pavements with their parents. Carolyn and Jane took their cues from us; if they could see we were okay, then they were too. Rochelle at 16, and always an independent thinker, was making up her own mind; she often asked for room service meals and slept a lot in the first week. I frequently wondered, but have never confirmed with her, if this was a way of escaping while she got used to so many new experiences—the food, heat, seeing such poverty and being stared at.

I was prepared for much that I encountered: cows wandering along the potholed roads, auto rickshaws vying with motorbikes and yellow taxis, markets where spices were set out in fantastically bright-coloured mini pyramids and the elegant sari-clad women. I would have been surprised if I hadn't noticed these differences from home. I had just completed a Bachelor's in social anthropology at Massey University, studying a host of peoples and cultures, and had used every opportunity in my final year to research and write about aspects of India. I'd read and written about Indian women in the workforce in the gender paper, Hindu religious practices in an Asian philosophy paper and poverty in South Asia in a social inequality paper. I was as prepared as I could be for social and cultural differences; it was the potential for any of us becoming ill that I remained concerned about.

The first time I remember consciously noting the existence of Anglo-Indians occurred early on in this trip. It was New Year's Eve, a few days after our arrival. We were still in Madras and had decided to celebrate the New Year at New Zealand time, which was 4:30 pm local time. In preparation for our hotel room party, we took a taxi to a local supermarket, the most Westernised I have yet been to in India. Two Australian women we had met at the

New Woodlands Hotel had told us about it. They had been there for weeks and one had lived in Madras earlier. While my girls were looking around the shelves and excitedly finding familiar food—Cadbury's chocolate, Coca-Cola and chippies—to take back for our 'party', a sari-clad Indian woman holding the hands of her two young children walked up to us. Bracing myself for another morally fraught exchange with a mother begging for her children beginning with: 'Help us mama, we are very poor', she said instead, 'Good afternoon Madam' and introduced herself. I don't remember her name, or the names of her children, but I clearly remember her pride as she said, 'They are Anglo-Indians. We speak English. Can we talk to you?' She clarified her request, explaining that her children wanted to talk to my girls, which they then did—mostly about where my girls were from, what New Zealand was like and why they were here. Once their gently inquisitorial conversation seemed exhausted, we wished each other a Happy New Year and headed back to the hotel with our treats. Although I never saw them again, little did I realise how deep my connection with this community was going to be. The next day we travelled by the Shatabdi Express to Bangalore. It wasn't until we were back in Madras that we had another Anglo-Indian-related experience.

In the six weeks between our two visits to Madras, we completed a southern Indian triangle: Bangalore and Mysore palaces on the one side, Kerala's waterways and Tamil Nadu's ancient temples on the other two (Photo I.1). Even before we left the subcontinent, we were making plans to come back. People we'd met had repeatedly told us that the south of India was the best part of the country, and we'd certainly become enchanted by most of what we experienced: the frothy yard-long poured coffees, delicately flavoured masala dosas, syrupy sweet *gulabjamuns*, the lushness of rice fields and coconut trees in Kerala, and the extreme friendliness of almost all the people we met. For all that, we were thinking of a North India trip next time, for a different experience of a country of such diversity.

In our last couple of days in Madras, we spent some time with the Australian women we'd met in our hotel earlier. I'd first bumped into one of them in the hotel lobby on the day we arrived in Madras. I might not have noticed her, as she was indistinguishable from many