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BEING ANGLO-INDIAN

Practices and Stories from Calcutta

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Social Anthropology
at Massey University

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2005

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnography of Anglo-Indians in Calcutta. All ethnographies are accounts arising out of the experience of a particular kind of encounter between the people being written about and the person doing the writing. This thesis, amongst other things, reflects my changing views of how that experience should be recounted. I begin by outlining briefly who Anglo-Indians are, a topic which in itself alerts one to complexities of trying to get an ethnographic grip on a shifting subject. I then look at some crucial elements that are necessary for an “understanding” of Anglo-Indians in Calcutta: the work that has already been done in relation to Anglo-Indians, the urban context of the lives of my research participants and I discuss the methodological issues that I had to deal with in constructing this account.

In the second part of my thesis I explore some crucial elements of the lives of Anglo-Indians in Calcutta: the place of Christianity in their lives, education not just as an aspect of socialisation but as part of their very being and, finally, the public rituals that now give them another way of giving expression to new forms of Anglo-Indian becoming.

In all of my work I was driven by a desire to keep close to the experience of the people themselves and I have tried to write a “peopled” ethnography. This ambition is most fully realised in the final part of my thesis where I recount the lives of three key participants.

I dedicate this work to my late parents,

Zoë and Kevin McNulty,

whose shortened lives prevent me from sharing this and so much more with them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Different people have been involved with this research at various times and I owe a debt of gratitude to so many.

To the Anglo-Indians in Calcutta who I worked with at different stages: for their insights and information, as well the practical assistance they gave me. The good company offered by many made my time in Calcutta a lot of fun as well as keeping it relatively free of difficulties. Because I have obscured the identity of some research participants by using pseudonyms, I name others in this section at the risk of offending those I don't name. There are, however, some people I feel I must single out to thank. I ask forgiveness in advance to those people who may feel overlooked; they know who they are and they will be able to recognise their own words in this work. Named and unnamed, I thank you all.

Of the people I identify, Theo heads the list. She, more than anyone, right from the beginning made me feel welcome: in her home, with her friends, and in her city. Unbeknown to her, she had a significant role to play in my taking on this project.

A special thanks is reserved for the three women whose stories I have written, whom I have referred to as Jane, Philomena, and Irene. Without their generosity in sharing the stories of their lives with me this work would not be as rich in people or experiences. I always wanted to write stories but I couldn't have done that without their enthusiastic participation.

I am grateful again to Theo for introducing me to many people, including the staff at Birkmyre Hostel, where I stayed for most of the time I spent in Calcutta. I thank everyone there, particularly Edward, Joanne, and Beryl, who helped to make it feel like my home. Theo also introduced me to Melvyn, Joan and family, whom I thank for their hospitality and assistance. In addition I thank Gillian, Neil and Joyce, and Barry and Denise who made time in their busy schedules to meet with me. Paul and Sandra, George and Jillian, Benny and Jenny offered me practical assistance (including jive

lessons) and helped to fill up my social calendar. I am appreciative of the company of Zena with whom I spent many enjoyable hours.

I would also like to thank the family of the delightful young woman who my family and I were sponsoring through Dr Graham's Homes when I embarked upon this project. Before I met her and her family I was feeling uncomfortable about the fact that, while we had sent money from New Zealand, I had offered little other support or encouragement. When I met her family my sense of guilt about that neglect was immediately dispelled – her family is one of the most supportive and loving I have met, anywhere. The one thing they didn't have was the financial means to follow through with their dreams – this we were able to offer. Whatever assistance we gave they have more than repaid to me in numerous ways.

Thanks also to Clayton, whose assistance, guidance and good company during my sojourns in Calcutta have been invaluable. He kept me in touch with the goings on in Calcutta between my trips there, and I wish him well and hope that all his dreams come to fruition.

I am grateful also to the non-Anglo-Indians I met in Calcutta, especially Ava, Rama and their family, who offered me hospitality, friendship and a non-Anglo-Indian insight into Anglo-Indians in Calcutta.

To the Anglo-Indians I met at the Reunion in Melbourne who made me feel welcome, I thank you. Many showed an interest in what I was there for, which I certainly appreciated, but what I was most touched by was that they involved me in all the events and encouraged me to feel that I was one of them.

I am grateful to past and present members of the EIC (The East India Club) in Melbourne with whom I have talked through ideas along the way. I thank them for their discussion of and ongoing interest in this project. I appreciated that they included me in the planning for the Anglo-Indian exhibition. I would particularly like to thank Michael for allowing me to spend time with his wonderful collection of Anglo-Indian books, Glenn for his time and the discussions we've had in relation to my project, and above all, Keith, who has been a rigorous critic and source of support especially in the

latter stages. The hours of conversation we have had about our parallel projects have been fun and rewarding.

I also take this opportunity to thank Alison Blunt for her interest and encouragement, for the material she provide me with, and for stimulating conversation at a critical phase.

Turning now to those people whose lives were most affected by my embarking on this study: Thanks to Bruce who was willing to embrace my dreams, with its impact on family life; I sincerely acknowledge his contribution. My daughters, Rochelle, Carolyn and Jane did without their mother for weeks on end, and without their love, understanding and support this project would not have been completed. I'm not sure what the costs to them have been but they have certainly grown up to be fine young women over the period of this project.

Now to a person whose belief in my abilities as an ethnographer gave me the courage to embark on this project – my supervisor, Henry Barnard. I thank him for so much. Henry has been a phenomenal supervisor and a good friend throughout. His ready advice and availability has made this project enjoyable, fulfilling and (reasonably) straightforward. His knack at dispelling doubts, dissolving obstacles, and untangling the occasional textual knots has been invaluable. Working with him as my supervisor has been a real pleasure.

My thanks to my co-supervisor, John Overton, who was exactly the second supervisor I needed. He demonstrated faith in my abilities from the beginning by giving me plenty of leeway, yet I always knew he was a phone call away should I need advice. I also appreciate his close reading of the final draft.

I thank Noeline for her editing work on the thesis, and for her friendship, and especially for her company in Calcutta for a fortnight. It's been great to have someone around who knows some of the people I spent time with.

I also want to thank my colleagues at Massey University: lecturers, graduate students and other friends on campus, for their sustained interest and encouragement. I am grateful to Sanal, a visiting scholar from India, who took a timely interest in my work. And Cherie: where would I have been without her numerous acts of assistance (and

our early morning caffeine fix) over the years? I also thank Di for her assistance through the library, and for her friendship and interest in the development of the project.

I am grateful to all of the members of the ‘Anthro’ PhD discussion group who provided a regular setting in which to explore ideas – methodological, ethical, as well as theoretical. It was also a safe place to unburden myself of uncertainties and share the odd crisis of confidence. I particularly acknowledge the input from Lorena, for proof reading of the final draft of the thesis and in the latter stages for the discussions we’ve had about doing ethnography in Calcutta.

Two people who, on three early mornings each week, were given project updates (whether they wanted them or not!) were my great friends and walking companions Amanda and Sandi. I thank them for this invaluable contribution to my life as I worked my way to this point. I also thank other friends and family for their continued encouragement and interest in what I was doing.

Without funding from Massey University, NZASIA/ASIA 2000, and the Foundation for Research in Science and Technology in the form of grants and scholarships I could not have supported my trips to India, or myself when at home and I am indebted to these organisations.

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