

January 2019

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Recommended Citation

Dey, Sayan (2019). Their Stories, Their Voices: The Orphans of the British Raj. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(2), 406-411.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss2/27>

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Their Stories, Their Voices: The Orphans of the British Raj

An Essay, to accompany the documentary short, “Their Stories, Their Voices: Orphans of the British Raj” <https://youtu.be/s0oM7-jEvu8>

By Sayan Dey¹

Abstract

The global evolution of the postcolonial era across diverse spatio-temporal zones generated a highly debatable paradigm: did postcoloniality generate a new epistemological and ontological framework that disentangled from the colonial patterns or did these patterns continue with the pre-existing colonial ideologies? With the end of colonization in India, the physically visible colonial empires of patriarchy were replaced by what we can refer to as “metaphysical empires”, which are physically invisible, but which operate ideologically in a very systematic and convincing manner, reproducing many of the hierarchies entrenched during the colonial period. The interpretation of postcolonial histories has been fractured with gendered, inter-racial, caste and communal hierarchies that have promoted specific (his)stories² and have demolished innumerable narratives by women. Even existing historical narratives by women in India are mostly written from a patriarchal gaze, underpinned with definite caste, communal, geographical, demographical and racial preferences, demonstrating the hegemony of patriarchy and the assurance of persistent patriarchal-colonial ideologies, through the self-centered socio-political designs of indigenous groups. As the theoretical backdrop, this essay explores the documentary focused on the contemporary Anglo-Indian women residents of Bow Barracks in Calcutta. The project sought to record and archive the undocumented socio-historical narratives of those women. The film was funded by the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Bridgewater State University, Massachusetts.

Keywords: postcolonial, ontological, gendered, feminine, documentary, Anglo-Indian women, Kolkata, Calcutta.

Introduction

As one walks out of the Central metro station in Kolkata, rushes through the Chowringhee crossing and lands straight into the chaotic pandemonium of Bow Street, one cannot ignore the tall red-bricked buildings on the left, with their dark patches of ancientness, tiredly looking over the newly painted apartments that proudly champion the doctrines of modernization. These red-bricked buildings are located in one corner of Bow Street called Bow Barracks and they belong to the Anglo-Indian community that has resided there since the First World War. Around 1912 the American troops arrived in Kolkata and settled in the Barracks. Highly dissatisfied with the living conditions, after a few weeks, they shifted to Fort William and before their departure they handed

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² (His)stories refer to the gendered hierarchies being created and maintained by the constant production and channelization of historical perspectives of/from patriarchy.

over the buildings to the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT). As a gesture of respect and fellowship, the trust, in turn handed over the buildings to the existing Anglo-Indian community, who stayed in and around Bow Street at a very nominal monthly rent (101 India, 2008). Now, the obvious question that comes to the forefront is why the houses were rented exclusively to the Anglo-Indians and not to the 'other' Indians? Did any form of class difference exist between the Anglo-Indians and the other Indians? Keeping these questions in mind, the following section briefly analyzes the unwelcomed socio-economic transformations that the Anglo-Indian community in India has experienced from the colonial to the postcolonial era.

The Postcolonial Transition

During the colonial era, especially at the time of British colonization, the Anglo-Indian community always enjoyed a superior socio-cultural and economic status as compared to non-Anglo-Indians. Being close to the Europeans in terms of language, skin color, fashion, food habits and behavioral patterns, they were always regarded as a crucial part of the European community (Stark, 23). Moreover, they faithfully assisted the colonizers in wars both within India and abroad. Historical records reveal that during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, there was a separate Anglo-Indian regiment which fought for the British to defeat the Indian troops (Llewellyn-Jones, 3) and faithfully assisted them in the establishment of the British government in India. But, after India's independence their wheel of fortune experienced a dramatic turn, and from a highly privileged socio-cultural position they were pushed to the margins. On the one hand, they were deserted by the colonizers and on the other hand they were not accepted by the Indians and were "labelled as Angrez" (Kohli, 2016). Though the Indian Constitution has ensured a provision of two seats in the Lok Sabha [House of Commons (Article 331)], allocation of grants to Anglo-Indian schools (Article 337) and employment reservations in various job places (Article 336), in reality most of lived, and continue to live, in a socio-economically dilapidated state (Andrews, 15). They are not accepted in the Indian social mainframe even in the contemporary period. Such is the condition of Anglo-Indians in Bow Barracks, Calcutta.

The residents of Bow Barracks were mostly employed as cabaret dancers, jazz musicians, hockey players, personal assistants, telegraph officers and railway men. After India's independence, cabaret dancing was condemned as socio-culturally demeaning and was discouraged in Kolkata. Live jazz was organized in the pubs, but their bands did not receive public attention during the British era (Capwell, 152). Hockey became the national sport, but gradually it lost its importance to cricket. Personal assistants with high academic qualifications were preferred to merely English speaking Anglo-Indians. The evolution of technological comforts made the telegraph offices almost non-functional, and railways no longer remained a monopoly of the Anglo-Indians (Hedin, 171). As a result of all of these changes, many Anglo-Indians lost their jobs. A major section of the financially flourishing Anglo-Indian community migrated to the suburbs of UK, US and Australia (Singh, 2017). Those who failed to go experienced acute poverty and a socio-cultural crisis due to their marginalization. In spite of such a crisis, one particular aspect sets this Anglo-Indian community apart from the rest and that is the social, cultural and the economic contributions of the Anglo-Indian women towards the welfare of the community in Bow Barracks since the beginning of post-independent era. The following section unfurls the various ways through which the current women residents of Bow Barracks struggle to preserve their Anglo-Indian habits and challenge the patriarchally structured definition of being an Anglo-Indian.

Voices of the unvoiced

This essay, which is the result of the documentary research project funded by the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, is centrally based on the experiential narratives of women from different age groups who currently live in the Barracks. The documentary, which has been published along with this article, was shot at different points of time throughout the fellowship period. The reason behind it was to capture the regular existential situation of Anglo-Indian women at different points of time. Before we venture into the experiential narratives of each and every participant let us argue the various ways through which the women from Bow Barracks are regularly challenged by the official definition of being an Anglo-Indian as incorporated by the Indian Constitution.

Anglo-Indianness and the Politics of Gender

According to Article 366 of the Indian Constitution, an Anglo-Indian is defined as “a person whose *father* or any of whose *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” [my italics] (quoted in Griffin, 2018). This definition, which was shaped and authenticated during the era of British colonization, clearly outlines the colonial-patriarchal intentions behind the systematic development of the Anglo-Indian community in India. As a result, those individuals whose mother was European and whose father was Indian were never accepted within the Anglo-Indian community, and for the residents of Bow Barracks the situation has always been critical. The earliest residents of Bow Barracks had no official records about their Anglo-Indian identity except as memories through some of their family members who continue to live there—and most of the current Anglo-Indian residents are orphans whose parental origin is unknown. Usually, they were brought up by their near and distant relatives. As a result they experience both external and internal forms of discrimination. In other words, they are not only segregated by the local non-Anglo-Indian society of Calcutta, but also by the socio-economically flourishing Anglo-Indians who live in different corners of the city.

During a conversation about Bow Barracks with an Anglo-Indian curio shop owner in Calcutta, he said that the Christian residents of Bow Barracks “can never be regarded as Anglo-Indians because they are mostly orphans. So, Bow Barracks is nothing more than a *Christian slum*” [my italics] (Personal Interview 2018). In spite of the fact that there are several Anglo-Indian welfare associations across the city, the residents of Bow Barracks continue to live in a neglected state³. Therefore, the contemporary women residents of Bow Barracks, through their habitual Anglo-Indian socio-economic practices, interrogate the politics of Anglo-Indian identity from individual (as women) as well as collective (as a community) perspective.

Felt Narratives

The documentary, “Their Stories, Their Voices: The Orphans of the British Raj”, centers around the life histories and various aspects of contemporary existence of seven women from

³ The Anglo-Indian welfare associations in Calcutta practice a clear policy of socio-cultural hierarchy as their social, cultural and philanthropic activities are usually targeted towards the elite-class Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta, who reside outside Bow Barracks. During the associations’ Anglo-Indian gatherings and celebrations, residents of Bow Barracks are hardly found because they are not considered ‘enough socio-culturally fit’ to be invited on such occasions.

seven different age groups, who currently reside in Bow Barracks and around different parts of Bow Street. I would like to briefly introduce those women who enthusiastically consented to be a part of this documentary:

- Cleopatra Mondejar (65 years): Cleopatra is an ex-cabaret dancer; her grandfather was French and her grandmother was Irish. She shares her childhood memories, her association with cabaret dancing and the rich uniqueness of Anglo-Indian culture.
- Jennifer (70 years): Jennifer is an ex-Cabaret and ex-Holup⁴ dancer. Mostly she performed with Cleopatra in different dance competitions, music parties and several other Anglo-Indian occasions in Calcutta. She talks broadly about the present scenario of the cultural crisis amongst the Anglo-Indians in the city.
- Zoe King Chew (65 years): Zoe was born to Anglo-Indian parents, but being an orphan she is not aware of her parentage. She was adopted by the nuns in Missionaries of Charity and there she grew up. Amidst the severe socio-cultural crisis of the Anglo-Indians in the contemporary era, she is very conscious about preserving her Anglo-Indianness and therefore Anglo-Indian foods play an important role in her life. In this documentary, she talks about different Anglo-Indian foods which she loves to prepare for her family members on different occasions.
- Petals D Souza (27 years), Sophia Francis (50 years) and Vanessa Sharma (40 years): Petals, Sophia and Vanessa work as English teachers in Union Chapel School, Calcutta and they are of Portuguese origin. Through this documentary, they argue the importance of striking a cultural balance through amalgamating Anglo-Indian cultural practices with others. They also believe that it is very difficult to keep all the Anglo-Indian traditions intact because of the growing trend of inter-cultural marriages with other communities.
- Avis Gomes Liang (79 years): Avis is of Portuguese origin and she lives with her son in Bow Barracks. She was adopted by her grand-aunt and at the age of 18 years she married her Chinese boyfriend in the Barracks. Her husband worked at a leather business and till his death she led a financially prosperous life. But after she became a widow⁵, she was pushed towards utter poverty and currently she survives on the monthly ration service of the Bow United Organization. In this video, she makes an effort to recollect her childhood memories in bits and fragments.

Keeping these personal narratives in mind, the documentary is broadly underpinned by two definite aspects:

- Firstly, a central goal is to bring the voices of the common women of Bow Barracks in Calcutta to the forefront. Some of them are nostalgic about their long-forgotten past; some of them still fight hard to keep their cultures and traditions alive through food, dance and fashion; some are less bothered about their glorious past and are

⁴ Holup dance is a form of Hip-Hop dance which originated in different parts of Africa. In this form of dance, the body movements offer a blend of Hip-Hop and various traditional dance forms of Africa.

⁵ In spite of several reform policies and protection acts, the existence of a widow in India continues to be patriarchally subjugated and socio-culturally tabooed. No matter to what religion and community they belong to, the widows in India are victimized by the psycho-sexually perverted gaze of patriarchy and treated as 'undignified objects of sexual and economic exploitation'.

more concerned with the struggles of the present; and some suffer from severe historical dementia.

- Secondly, these voices help in the scholarly enterprise to interrogate and dismantle the ways through which newspaper articles, films and existing documentaries have stereotyped and misrepresented the Anglo-Indians of Bow Barracks. They have either been socio-culturally exoticized as a charming community full of happiness, prosperity and glory or have been anti-socially portrayed as a community inflicted with sexual violence, drug abuse and alcoholism.

Structure of the Documentary

The documentary commences with a brief history about the origin and position of Anglo-Indian women in Bow Barracks. Then it gradually moves towards the experiential narratives of the earlier and the current women residents of the Barracks. The documentary concludes in the South Park Street Cemetery that metaphorically represents the ‘almost dead’ socio-cultural history of the Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta in general and Bow Barracks in particular.

Conclusion

In nutshell, this essay reflects on the various socio-historical factors that motivated me to develop the documentary project. It also outlines the structure of the documentary and introduces the participants.

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