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THE ANGLO-INDIANS

PHOTOGRAPHS	Dileep Prakash
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ANGLO-INDIANS ARE VANISHING AS A COMMUNITY. PRAKASH AND SEALY TRY TO RESCUE THEM FROM OBLIVION WITH AN EXHIBITION AND A BOOK

KISHORE SINGH

For two years Dileep Prakash “travelled everywhere except McCluskieGanj” — which as everyone knows is an Anglo-Indian stronghold and railway colony “that has been done to death by others before me” — photo-archiving the members of these “first modern Indians”, according to writer Irwin Allan Sealy. “It was shocking to me,” says Prakash — whose wife June née Davy is Anglo-Indian — “how fast the Anglo-Indians were assimilating with the other Indian communities. “They had a distinctiveness that is disappearing,” he explains.

What was the more irksome was that the Anglo-Indians had been given an image, courtesy of Bollywood, that bordered on the negative. The vamps were always Mona and Lily, the cretinous villains were Peter and Mogambo, they had permissive lives, smoked and drank. “What’s worse,” Prakash is clearly hurt to the core, “even their cuisine, which is so exceptional, is rapidly declining,” cribbing that even in the 15 years since their marriage, his wife’s own culinary skills have more often than not made way for a more pan-Indian menu.

The decline of the Anglo-Indians may be difficult to arrest, but Prakash was clear he could at least begin to archive their presence, and so set about a two-year yatra, travelling north to south and east to west, winning over their confidence and getting them to pose for his camera.

Even in this short period, members of the community, many of them old “but still fit, and fond of dressing up”, have since died, lending an urgency to Prakash’s work.

Last evening, some of those pictures of the thousand-odd people he has photographed went up at the Photoink gallery in New Delhi, and simultaneously a book with an essay by Sealy (whose earlier works include *The Trotter-Nama*, *The Everest Hotel* and *Red*) was launched at the event. Sealy writes with sensitivity of their separateness from the very beginning. “The first births across the land would have been fraught but novel events. As the novelty wore off, practicalities would have arisen: who would pay for the child’s keep? What would he wear? Might the father be persuaded to acknowledge the child? ... But very likely the father had disappeared, moved on with his regiment, or his ship, or his convoy, and every so often in the streets of any city there might appear this startling cuckoo, a fair-skinned child in native clothes.”

He imagines a generation passing by, the East India Company taking such interest as it could in their welfare. “They eat with knives and forks, not always a diet the father or the mother would approve; they wear hats. They study and play and quarrel in the foreign tongue.” This hybrid created a new order, the men working

as clerks for the Company, the women finding willing suitors within the ranks of European men forced into uneasy bachelorhood. And so came about a community, “next to but apart from the Europeans” called, in the early years, East Indians.

Later, the East Indians would marry their own kind, creating a new caste that, unlike the rest of their countrymen “do not favour sons or lament daughters or stigmatize widows” and “are largely educated”. “If in manners and morals the latest Indians modelled themselves scrupulously on the English,” writes Sealy, “it was an imitation not craven or servile but occasioned willy nilly by the vacuum into which a new thing falls.” And in choosing to ally themselves with Europeans they merely chose what other Indians are happy to repeat today, the more modern cultural overlapping of Europe and Asia.

“So when they spoke of *Home* they were not being ridiculous; the country they had never seen was the source of all that they valued deeply, while in the only language they spoke, the word India was itself still foreign. Their very persons, their lived experience, domesticated both worlds — and embodied the worlds they stood for. They were foreign and yet native, native and yet foreign, and in that vexed identity lay their double fate.”

This lot then were the Anglo-Indians for which reservations within the colony following 1857 brought them the assurance of middle level jobs in the post and telegraph services, customs and police and on the network of canals, and in a network of “English medium” schools that allowed Indians to learn “Wordsworth under a mofussil sky”, though they have unfortunately remained, almost now to the end “the objects of prejudice” as they once were of protection.

Prakash fears the Anglo-Indian community’s assimilation could be complete by 2020. If indeed if it does happen — then, or anytime soon after — his portraits of the last survivors of a community distinguished more by its dignity than its alienness, would have served their purpose.

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