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Imagine you are sitting in a moorab on a veranda somewhere in India. The year is 1950. It is late. All is silent. The heat of the day is spent. A gentle breeze ruffles your hair. Stars come out. Somewhere in the darkness cattle low, a train shunts. The balmy night air carries the strains of a distant LP record playing, cherry pink and apple blossom white … Friends stop by. They join you on the veranda. 'Hullo men.' ['men' was a colloquialism used as a greeting]. Flash forward to another veranda somewhere in Australia. The year is 1972. It’s another balmy night under the Southern Cross. Cole Joye is on the radio, and the smell of Vindaloo is in the air. Friends stop by. ‘G’day, Mate’.

A Passage from India celebrates the presence in Australia of one of India’s smallest ethnic groups – the Anglo-Indians. The East Indian Club of Melbourne share stories of a community that has immigrated from India but often don’t identify as Indians; who generally look like Indians but have their own identifiable cultural practices. Having left India and re-settled in Australia, some Anglo-Indians have nothing to do with the rest of the community while others join Anglo-Indian Clubs. Many identify more with England than with India and others who whilst in India saw themselves as more Anglo than Indian, in Australia are re-discovering their Indian background. This exhibition does not represent all Anglo-Indians, we, like the wider community form our identity and preserve cultural practices through a range of experiences. These stories tell of Anglo-Indian immigration to Australia from the perspective of three generations: those who arrived immediately after Indian independence in 1947, those who emigrated in the 1970’s, and the children of both groups who were born in Australia.
Born to Leave?

Anglo-Indians came to Australia for a variety of reasons. Many Anglo-Indian immigrants to Australia left India after India became independent in 1947. Some Anglo-Indians left India because they did not want to become involved in the Hindu/Muslim conflict. Others left because they identified very strongly with Britain, viewed Britain as ‘home’ and felt they had no place in independent India.

In a speech delivered to the All India Anglo-Indian Association in 1942, when Indian independence was inevitable, Sir Frank Anthony, President of the Association, said:

“Let us cling and cling, tenaciously, to all that we hold dear, our language, our way of life and our distinctive culture. But let us always remember that we are Indians.”

Despite Anthony’s rhetoric, significant numbers of Anglo-Indians felt no affinity with India and left India for their ‘home’ in the United Kingdom. In 1947 some 200,000 Anglo-Indians lived in India. Approximately one third of this group left India by the 1970s. Some felt that opportunities for employment in India had diminished; others felt alienated from Indian culture, believing that new requirements to learn Indian languages would diminish their long-term job prospects.

Australia became a favoured destination for Anglo-Indians in the 1970s, the highpoint of Anglo-Indian immigration to Australia, for two reasons. First, the so-called White Australia policy was abolished by the early nineteen seventies. Second, UK restricted Anglo-Indian immigration by withdrawing the so-called ‘grandfather clause’ which gave UK citizenship to anyone who could prove they had a British ancestor. Moreover, Australia’s immigration policy based on the NUMAS point system favoured immigrants with English language skills. There is little doubt that Australia is now the preferred destination for Anglo-Indian emigrants. A recent study of Anglo-Indians in Madras revealed that Indians in Tamil Nadu commonly refer to Anglo-Indians as ‘dings’ or ‘dingoes’ because of their desire to re-locate to Australia, actively seeking information about Australian culture.
Since Anglo-Indians are a 'hybrid' community it is not surprising to find that Anglo-Indian cuisine is also a combination of European and Indian flavours. For the most part, Anglo-Indians have adopted, and in many cases adapted, the varied regional cuisines of India. For example, Anglo-Indians from Tamil Nadu have a preference for masala dosas while those from northern states enjoyed shami and kati kebabs. However, Anglo-Indians also cook traditional roasts, and have taste for other British delicacies such as cutlets. They are not averse, however, to adding a dash of chilli to add a bit of spice and colour to English cuisine. Nonetheless, dishes like curried ‘trotters’ and ‘oxtail’ are perhaps the most exemplary and unique Anglo-Indian foods because they combine quintessentially British cuts of meat with Indian spices.

Anglo-Indians generally adopt European etiquette at the dinner table. Food also plays an important role in Anglo-Indian social life, particularly on festive occasions like Christmas and New Year's Day. Traditional Christmas dinner in most Anglo-Indian homes often comprises of duck roast, chicken roast, boiled vegies, followed by plum pudding. Visitors are spoiled with kul kuls, rose cookies, fudge, cheese straws, fruit cake, walnut cake and seed cake. While most Indian spices are now readily available in Australia, this was not always the case. Anglo-Indian migrants to Australia missed Indian spices and other sub-continental food products and tell stories of how they convinced local supermarkets to import the ‘hot stuff’.

Today, most Anglo-Indians opt for more tasty Indian cuisine and have adapted English foods into more flavoursome ‘fries’ and curries, hence the ‘jhal frezi’ and ‘glace’. Omelettes and cutlets now include the compulsory chilli and coriander. Another favourite with Anglo-Indians is kofta curry (meatballs) and yellow rice. Vindaloo and parathas are preferred for picnics and travelling. Even the Australian barbie has been converted into a feast of masala lamb chops, spicy prawns, chilli chicken and tandoori-style beef.
Religion and Superstitions

The European cultural heritage of the Anglo-Indian extended to their religious beliefs so that Christianity became the cornerstone of Anglo-Indian culture. It was not uncommon to hear Christian names in use as the first names of Anglo-Indians, for instance, Mary, Joan, Michael and John, something that helped to preserve their distinctive identity within the pluralist religious landscape of the sub-continent. Anglo-Indian schools run by Christian missionaries, which most of the children attended, carefully maintained this culture.

Interestingly, while Christianity was a feature that set Anglo-Indians apart from the rest of the Indian community, it helped them to assimilate in Australia where they joined Church congregations, participated actively in faith communities and sent their children to Christian schools if they could.

India also affected the spiritual leanings of Anglo-Indians. Surrounded as they were by evidence of beliefs in a parallel spirit world where churails or putniboorees (evil spirits in the shape of beautiful women with their feet turned backwards) wandered abroad, or where spirits dwelt in banyan or peepul trees, many comfortably absorbed this aspect of Indian life. However, on their arrival in Australia they found that an awareness of the spirit world was mostly absent in the urban context.

The Church in India became an important meeting place where one caught up with friends after the services, or noted new arrivals in town. Priests were well respected and often invited to share a meal. They were called upon to bless the family home or advise the family on a variety of matters:

*The parish priest must have been very broad-minded because he gave us permission to attend the Methodist school, the only stipulation being that we had to attend Catechism classes with him on Sunday and that we went to Church on Days of Obligation.*

Pat Coshan
‘Hockey one, Hockey two, Hockey Roo’

Hockey, more than any other sport or recreational activity, is synonymous with Anglo-Indian culture. It is unclear why this sport occupies such a privileged place in the Anglo-Indian story. One theory is that hockey was a prominent part of the curriculum in Anglo-Indian schools such as La Martinere and Campion. What is not in doubt is that Anglo-Indians brought their love of the game to Australia, and were important advocates for the sport, a fact noted by the award-winning Anglo-Indian novelist, I. Allan Sealy in his book, The Trotter-Nama (1990):

“Next to go was half the [Indian] Olympic hockey team; only they went the other way, Down Under. The result was that India’s hockey supremacy was lost while Australia would become a team to reckon with. Australia took Trotters [Anglo-Indians] by the thousands”

Indeed, Anglo-Indians have played important roles in hockey in both India and Australia over the years. Until recently, an Anglo-Indian, Paul Gudion, was captain of the ‘Olyroos’, the Australian Olympic Hockey team.

Hockey continues to be a significant aspect of social life for many Anglo-Indians. Ian Jennings observes that:

“The working week becomes all the more bearable with the anticipation of training on Thursday nights and match day on Monday nights. Then we get a chance to indulge in the sport we all love and best of all the camaraderie and company afterwards. The scotch and soda flows liberally and, of course, accompanied by curry and rice and the nostalgia of past days.”

Keith Butler underscores the importance of hockey in the cultural life of Anglo-Indians when he writes:

“As I move around the field I cannot but sometimes be aware of ritual, dance—a hockey choreography — my feet move to patterns, a buski — feint, here, a step there and now and again the stick feels iconically historical — more lance, saber, pen, jadoo stick.”
Australian Anglo-Indians?

It is impossible to choose one’s genetic identity. If you are born with black hair, brown eyes and dark skin there is nothing you can do about it (outside of drastic cosmetic surgery). However, cultural identity is another matter, as many Australians of Anglo-Indian parentage will attest. The children of Anglo-Indian migrants born in Australia have a wide range of attitudes about their ‘mixed’ cultural heritage.

Brett identifies strongly with Anglo-Indian culture.

“What I’ve gained from being Anglo-Indian is a lot of my values, a lot of my morals, a lot of my personal beliefs and stuff like that, which you don’t see everyday, but they’re very strong inside of me.”

Mahla doesn’t have such a strong sense of Anglo-Indian identity, and identifies more with her Australian mother’s culture.

“I don’t see myself as really Anglo-Indian, but I see Dad as [an Anglo-Indian], but I’ve lived such a Western life. I went to schools where the majority of students were Anglo-Saxon.”

Australians with Anglo-Indian parents, even when they totally identify themselves as Australians often find that they have to account for their dark skin. Michelle explains:

“A lot of people say, like, ‘what nationality are you?’, and I just say Australian. And they say ‘OK, but the colour of your skin and everything, so what’s your background?’ Then we say Anglo-Indian, and they sort of refer to you as the Sikhs with the turban. ‘No, not those types of Indians’, and we have to sort of go into it and explain what an Anglo-Indian is.”

At the end of the day, it’s up to each one of us to construct a cultural identity with which we are comfortable and which is influenced by many factors such as education, life experiences, family upbringing. As Brett wryly observes:

“I live like an Australian, if there’s such a thing. I mean, what is an Australian? It’s a country full of multicultural people who wanted to find something better.”
The Drawing Room

Indian bungalows were large one-storeyed brick dwellings with large shady verandahs. Within, the room that provided the centre for both formal and informal social occasions, and where one usually received one’s guests, was the drawing room, also sometimes known as the ‘Hall’. This was where the family usually gathered in late evening, although on hot summer days, they would sit outside in the garden or on the verandah until it had cooled down a bit.

The lounge suite and other casual chairs in the drawing room were usually centred under a ceiling fan. Often these had timber frames and woven cane seats/backs which let the air pass through more freely. Embroidered scattered cushions and colourful matching curtains made the room cosy and comfortable. Family photographs and other pictures adorned the walls and brass jardineres (plant pot holders) filled with lush tropical plants were common. Often there was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, sometimes accompanied by a small lamp reflecting the family’s devout faith. The room usually had cabinets and shelves of ornaments, books, and magazines, the latter providing evidence that reading was a favourite past-time. Homes of enthusiastic shikaris (hunters) may have had deer heads, elephant tusks and other symbols of the ‘shoot’ including a stuffed tiger or two crouching in the corner.

A wireless set and a gramophone with a stack of records were usual features since music and dancing was an important part of Anglo-Indian life and often family and friends may have gathered around a piano for sing-a-longs, or to play card games, board games or caroms (game of skill played on a wooden board with different black, white and red flat circular pieces called carom men).

When Anglo-Indians arrived in Australia, the drawing room became the lounge room, in line with the name that other Australians used for their formal living space.