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Reflections on Anglo-Indian Experiences of Citizenship and Legitimacy

Robyn Andrews
(Massey University, New Zealand)
R.Andrews@massey.ac.nz

The September 2017 IUS workshop *Erosions of Legitimacy and Urban Futures: Ethnographic Research Matters*, as outlined in the Introduction to this Special Issue (Pardo and Prato 2018), gave participants the opportunity to explore ideas around legitimacy, drawing on their own ethnographically sourced material to do so. The organisation of five full days of critique and discussion of each other’s work and the central concerns, including how issues of legitimacy might be investigated, effectively stimulated our ideas and thoughts about our own projects in ways that would not otherwise have happened, or at least not as quickly. My contribution focused on legitimacy around citizenship for a minority Indian-resident community, the Anglo-Indians. It drew attention to what is required to be an Indian citizen and described the distinctly Indian version of secularism. It looked at the ways in which a sense of citizenship is currently threatened for some sections of the population — as secularism itself is — and explored potential means by which members of the community might maintain a sense of legitimacy, and for some a measure of power, within their own community and the nation. An aspect I had not considered prior to the workshop is that legitimacy is something that in certain circumstances is competed for, that is, it has a zero-sum game quality; so, when one group gains, another loses. I now briefly review the arguments I made, drawing on ethnographic material, beginning by introducing the community I focus upon.

Anglo-Indians are a minority community of mixed Indian and European descent. The community is the result of various European groups making their home in India from the very late 15th century onwards. From the liaisons that ensued, a culturally distinct minority community was established in India. They are defined in the Constitution which states that:

> ‘An Anglo-Indian is a person whose father or any of whose other 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’ (Section 366-2).

Socially and culturally Anglo-Indians are habitually more western than Indian in their practices and world views, for example, they are Christians, mostly have English as their mother tongue, and they have European names. They have a background of attachment to Britain so it is understandable that Indian Independence in 1947 appeared to pose a potentially serious threat to them and Anglo-Indians were fearful of reprisals once India gained its independence. These retaliations did not, in fact, eventuate; rather, the community was accorded a number of benefits written into the Constitution of the newly appointed Congress government. The benefits included political representation, employment reservations (referred

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to by Anglo-Indians as ‘quotas’) in certain occupation sectors, and an allocation of grants for Anglo-Indian schools. For all that, from 1947 many Anglo-Indians migrated, mainly to English-speaking Commonwealth countries.

Their sense of having a legitimate place in India has at times been threatened, such as during the period of transition from Britain to Indian rule, and then again in the 1960s coinciding with a move in India to replace English as the national language which they mostly did not speak well enough for employment and other purposes. Other reasons for the insecurity at this time are attributed to the closure of large international companies in the main centres where many Anglo-Indians had employment and the end of employment quotas (Blunt 2005).

As I describe next, through the constitutional definition of who qualifies as an Indian citizen, and India’s particular version of secularism, Anglo-Indians should have the freedom to enact their religious and cultural practices in India, that is, they should be able to freely and legitimately practice being Anglo-Indian.

The constitution of India requires that a citizen of India meets ‘birth’ criteria (Mitra 2010: 46) with the 5th Article of the Constitution stating:

> At the commencement of this Constitution, every person who has his domicile in the territory of India and—
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> (a) who was born in the territory of India; or
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> (b) either of whose parents was born in the territory of India; or
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> (c) who has been ordinarily resident in the territory of India for not less than five years immediately preceding such commencement, shall be a citizen of India.

Secularism is the other protection offered to Anglo-Indians and other minorities in India. This means that the state acts as a patron to all religions equally, unlike in other nations where secularism is understood to mean there is a separation of the state from religion (Chatterjee 1995, McNamara 2015). The Congress party safeguarded this ideal of multi-religious state support by enshrining it in the constitution.

Let us now look at threats eroding Anglo-Indians’ sense of being legitimate Indian citizens. In May 2014, after more than 60 years of mostly Congress-led central governments, the Bharatiya Janata Party (translated as The People’s Party, and abbreviated to BJP) was elected in what has been described as a landslide victory.[1] This party is described by many commentators as right wing. Others describe it as Hindu-chauvinist, known for its commitment to Hindutva (that is, an ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life), with its policy historically reflecting Hindu nationalist positions. The BJP promotes the idea of ‘India for Hindus’, and has implemented Hindu ideals in a number of states where it is also the ruling party. In some states the BJP has implemented sanctions on those who contravene Hindu ideals, for example, in Maharashtra where it is now forbidden to eat beef. Such actions go against the idea of secularism with its requirement of religious freedom, and support for minority religious practices. Not surprisingly, this has the effect of eroding a sense of security for minorities such as Anglo-Indians. This changed political situation represents for many Anglo-Indians a moment of increased concern on a par with that of independence, and then reemphasised in the 1960s.

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[1] Prior to this, they had been part of a coalition government in 1998 for a year, then again in coalition for a full term until 2004.

So, what can Anglo-Indians do to ameliorate this sense of insecurity? I draw on ethnographic examples from my research in Kolkata which illustrate strategies that may be employed in carving out a legitimate place in the nation.[2] One example lies within the being of a person; the current president-in-chief of the All India Anglo-Indian Association (AIAIA) whose home is Kolkata, and the other is an organisation called, Calcutta Anglo-Indian Service Society (CAISS). The former demonstrates the conditions that allow for a position of legitimacy and power within the community and the nation. The latter illustrates how an organisation can work with and for their community to make a space for community members to feel at home and cared for, with access to some power.

Let us look briefly at relevant details of the two examples. A person has had an élite upbringing in a Bengali area of the city and attended prestigious (Anglo-Indian run) schools, and a well-regarded university.[3] He attributes his successes to early assimilation into a mostly Hindu Bengali neighbourhood, which contributed to a sense of belonging to the nation through language and cultural ability and literacy/s. He also displays a strong sense of who he is as an Anglo-Indian, coupled with a secure personal identity through his family's and his own achievements. He recently joined the current ruling national political party which gives him capacity for political action which he may not otherwise have had access to. While this may not be a common scenario, some aspects are achievable for Anglo-Indians who learn the local language well, understand the cultural practices of neighbours, achieve a sound education and take employment opportunities.

I now turn to the second example, that of an organisation working to empower a community to feel legitimised: The Calcutta Anglo-Indian Service Society (CAISS). This organisation is very effective in the care it provides and the social networks it contributes to, both inside and outside India. The society was established in 1976 and has a reputation of humanity and integrity. Its constitution makes it clear that the aims are more than community-centric; it proposes to prepare community members, especially the youth, to be part of the nation. It takes care of those who are less able to care for themselves.

The institutional and personalised strategies employed by CAISS ameliorate many Anglo-Indians' feeling of being alienated by the nation. CAISS provides its members and beneficiaries with a sense of belonging to something that they identify with culturally, and of which they feel they are a legitimate member.

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[2] At the IUS workshop, a participant made the germane point that Kolkata's Anglo-Indian might be more sheltered from BJP policies than other Anglo-Indians might. Their numbers, and more prominent positioning, in combination with the city's cosmopolitanism were all thought to play a part in this situation.

[3] For his self-narrated life story see Andrews (2014).

To summarise, in the case of the individual, he has the political wherewithal and accumulated capitals (in the Bourdieuian sense; Bourdieu 1984, 1986) and cosmopolitanism to negotiate his own way. The organisation, on the other hand, works outside the broader political system and offers a unique and invaluable service to Kolkata's Anglo-Indians. These two ethnographic examples draw out different aspects of what legitimacy looks like, or what it lacks, in this socio-political space.

As I have indicated, the type of legitimacy that I addressed was concerned with citizenship, and the consensus about whose worldviews and practices are endorsed and recognised by the nation as acceptable — socially and individually. It was also about who has power, and how tactics and strategies can be activated to achieve influence in particular situations. Pardo and Prato write about the nation's responsibility to offer citizens a sense of legitimate belonging, stating that the key task of governance is, 'to establish and nurture the connection with citizens' values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the exercise of power' (Pardo and Prato 2010: 1). This addresses the concerns of my work and the reliance of citizens on their government to provide a secure socio-political environment. But what happens when that is not provided?

India has been known for its accommodation of diverse worldviews and practices; that is, for a tolerance of difference leading to relative lack of conflict or competition over the legitimacy of different socio-cultural and religious practices. This appears to have altered over the past few years, however, with the current government demonstrating that some ways of being are more acceptably 'Indian' than others. A Hindu nationalist agenda sets up a structure entailing one set of practices being seen and felt as more legitimate than another. As Hindu members of the BJP feel emboldened, and encouraged, by having their actions endorsed by the government, other minority groups are losing their sense of legitimacy. Abraham's work in villages in Kerala (2018a, 2018b), Boucher's in a central square in Montreal (2018a, 2018b) and Pardo's analysis of the Naples ethnography (2018a, 2018b), which were presented at the workshop, provide ethnographic examples illustrating that in *certain situations*, as in this case, there is not the same access to a legitimate position for all; rather, a zero-sum game operates. That is, legitimacy can be seen as being finite; so, when one group gains, another loses. Conflicting claims to or views of legitimacy, with different agents competing for the same space, may result in one being deemed more legitimate, while another's claim to legitimacy is eroded.

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