'The Eurasian Question' : the colonial position and postcolonial options of colonial mixed ancestry groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina compared

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4 Socio-economic position of Eurasians until 1900

4.1 Introduction

In all three colonies, Eurasians were viewed as (more or less) loyal children who needed to be raised as responsible citizens. They were active as an extension of western European colonial rule and worked in low-ranking clerical roles in governmental offices. In these occupations, they earned less than Europeans doing the same jobs, which caused resentment among Eurasians. They did not have the right to possess arable land in any of the colonies, so they could not really become 'rooted' in the tropical soil.

4.2 British India: 'Half-caste' image of Anglo-Indians and pauperism committee

The Anglo-Indians in British India were regarded as an isolated, 'half-caste pariah' group. They were not recognised as British, or incorporated into the indigenous society, and they generally held lower administrative jobs in the colonial civil service.[1] The British colonisers treated Anglo-Indians like they treated the Indians, as 'half grown-up' children who had to be protected by a benevolent and autocratic paternal government. The only difference was that Anglo-Indians were seen by the British colonial authorities as loyal children upon whom they could rely.[2] Within the caste system, there was no place for the hybrid Anglo-Indian group. They were ranked in the lowest caste. Even when they had dark skin, they could not pass themselves off as indigenous, because of caste restrictions. In addition, Hindu women who married outside the caste system with British *memsahibs* or had relationships with British men were disowned and became social pariahs, as was true for their children. Radical exclusion by indigenous society enforced the attachment of Anglo-Indians to the British side of their ancestry.[3] The Anglo-Indian community as a whole was not ranked high in the status system of India, although it was ranked above the 'untouchables'.[4]

Anglo-Indians were regarded as 'half-caste' by the dominant British group, 'no-caste' by the indigenous group, and 'outcast' by other minority groups on the Indian subcontinent. The Anglo-Indians were racially unacceptable to both the Indians and the British, and as a result they tried to buttress their low self-esteem by identifying with the British rulers.[5] Because of this 'half-caste' image, European families felt ashamed when they learned about a potential marriage with a Eurasian or indigenous

person. Anglo-Indian brides or grooms tried to obscure their origins, even to family members.[6]

The British authorities were concerned about the presence of Anglo-Indian and poor white children living in the indigenous Indian environment as it harmed the credibility of the British colonials. In the British Indian context, Anglo-Indians and poor whites were usually taken together and described as the 'Domiciled' community by the British colonial authorities. They considered them almost inseparable in practice. Orphanages were set up for the Anglo-Indian and poor white children. The oldest institution for Anglo-Indians was St. George's Anglo-Indian School and orphanage, founded by the Church of England. It was originally set up as St Mary's Charity School in Jersey House at Fort St George in 1715. At that time, many British soldiers still married indigenous women. Soldiers died young, either in battle or from disease, and their children became orphans or half-orphans. The orphanage was meant to help these children. Since 1778, St. George's was a combination of an orphanage and a boarding school.[7] In 1787, the Female Orphan Asylum started, which was the first European girls' school in India.[8] The military authorities at Fort William also started schools for the children of officers and other military personnel. These included orphanages for Eurasians, since most children of mixed ancestry had a British father working in the armed forces. Numbers increased because the military expanded from a few hundred in mid-eighteenth century British India to 18,000 by 1790.[9] Two famous eighteenth-century charity schools were started under the sponsorship of a military orphan society founded by major general Kilpatrick in 1783 for the maintenance and education of destitute children from officers and military men of other ranks. At Howrah, this orphan society started two educational institutions: the Upper and Lower Military Orphanages, which were subdivided into a boys' and a girls' institution. The Upper Orphanage was meant for Eurasian children of officers and the Lower one for children of soldiers and non-commissioned officers. The Upper Orphanage was abolished in 1846, because it had become obsolete as all sons of the officers were sent to the UK for their education.[10] When they returned to India they acquired good positions in the Company's service. The teachers at the Lower institution gave their Eurasian pupils a practical, elementary education. The boys were employed in the junior ranks of the Company's service. Girls became domestic servants in the houses of the East India Company officials and Army officers. In addition, British colonials portrayed many of the Eurasian girls as slaves and 'married them off' to lower British colonial officials.[11]

'Living in scarcely conceivable state of misery and degradation'

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British rulers worried about the growth of a poor white and Eurasian under class. Lord Canning (1812-1862), the first Governor General of British India, was quoted at length in a newspaper:

> We shall soon find ourselves embarrassed in all large towns and stations, with a floating population of Indianized English, loosely brought up, and exhibiting the worst qualities of both races. I can hardly imagine a more profitless, unmanageable community that one so

composed. It might be long before it would grow to what could be called a class dangerous to the State; but a very few years will make it, if neglected, a glaring reproach to the Government and to the faith which it will however ignorant and vicious, nominally profess. [...] A single great enterprise, the railways, now support between 5,000 and 6,000 Europeans, including women and children, in Bengal alone, and the last census discloses a European and half-cast population of 83,935 in that one Presidency. A large proportion of these thousands are sunk in the depths of poverty, misery and vice. In the single city of Calcutta the number of arrests of Europeans for vagrancy amounted to 963 in 1871, and the evil has increased so rapidly as to require one stringent Act after another, and to call forth a still sharper law during the present year. The lower classes of half-castes in India lead the life of parish dogs, skulking on the outskirts between the native and the European communities, and branded as noxious animals by both. [...] The Archdeacon of Calcutta summarizes: 'For this vast accumulation of beings bearing English names and nominally professing the Christian faith, no adequate provision has been made by which they can obtain sufficient education to enable them to earn an honest livelihood. The system of public instruction in India was meant for the natives, and not for Europeans and half-castes. The latter may starve or beg, or steal and go to gaol. 'What may be said of this class in Calcutta', writes the Archdeacon, 'holds good of it also at all the great towns of India. There is in every one of them a considerable number of lower class Eurasians, living in scarcely conceivable state of misery and degradation. Though professedly Christian, they know next to nothing about their faith, never attend a place of worship [...] A vast miserable population of Europeans and half castes is growing up in that country unable to earn their bread, ignorant to the rudiments of their religion, a scandal to the white colour, and with the sole career before them of the House of Correction and the gaol.[12]

As the above newspaper article showed, the British were concerned about the growing Eurasian and poor white community and felt responsible for its existence. This is also illustrated by the following quote from the *Manchester Guardian* from 1892:

> Of the Europeans and Eurasians domiciled in Calcutta nearly one-sixth has been traced out to be in actual receipt of charitable relief. Among the Eurasians or persons of mixed descent, the proportion of paupers approaches to nearly one-fourth of the whole community. [British colonial Sir Eliot describes] the widespread pauperism of the descendants of European or mixed parentage as 'an inheritance from the special conditions of the British occupation of India'.[13]

The British installed a pauperism committee, which carried out research on the Calcutta Eurasian and poor white community. Based on this research, an Indian Civil Service officer concluded that most Eurasians were living 'on endowments of their relatives and friends, in convents, in lunatic asylums, in jail or by begging.' In 1912, a conference on the education of the domiciled community in India at Simla concluded that the problem of pauperism and unemployment among the domiciled community was so deeply rooted that the only solution was compulsory education and the institutionalisation of children in special orphanage-style schools. These had already been built from the end of the eighteenth century onwards.[14]

Under pressure from the 'Indianisation' movement British colonial officials gradually restricted the preferential treatment of Eurasians regarding jobs from 1924 onwards. Anglo-Indians regarded these jobs as their unalienable right. Sometimes, they had to go to great lengths to secure one of these jobs by proving their non-Asiatic dom-

icile status and strong links to the UK.[15] Anglo-Indians had made themselves indispensable as intermediaries in the lower civil service jobs. They gave the orders and implemented the hard work regimes that Indian workers protested against. Furthermore, Anglo-Indian railway workers were compulsorily enrolled in the Auxiliary Defence Force, which often brutally suppressed strikes.[16] In this way, they helped the British to maintain colonial rule and to run their colony. The British had fewer social contacts with Anglo-Indians in the second half of the nineteenth century than they had before that era. They continued to treat the community as a social unit distinguishable from the larger Indian society, reflecting the tensions of empire as described by Cooper and Stoler.[17] Because they had never developed their own enterprises, Anglo-Indians became dependent upon employment offered to them by the British government.[18]

4.3   Dutch East Indies: Social layers in the Indo-European group

In the Dutch East Indies, a minority of the Indo-Europeans were born in the upper social layer of colonial society. Their fathers were high civil servants, doctors or successful entrepreneurs. Frequently, they obtained a university degree in the Netherlands and were no longer identified as Indo-Europeans.[19] Eurasians from the upper middle class had finished Dutch high school and worked as teachers and journalists.[20] Illustration 2 testifies this by showing Indo-Europeans, who stood next to a telescope in the relatively wealthy neighbourhood of Weltevreden, Batavia. Yet, these were exceptions. The majority of the fathers of Indo-Europeans belonged to the colonial middle class. They were lower civil servants, soldiers, small entrepreneurs and employees at the agricultural enterprises, mainly the sugar plantations.[21] Their children became lower civil servants and clerks, for example in the railway service. Lastly, a large part of the Indo-Europeans belonged to the lowest strata of society and they were involved in theft, running brothels and the opium trade. The ordinary soldiers of the Royal Dutch Indies Army were usually also counted among this group.[22]

   Overall, Indo-Europeans were found in all layers of Dutch East Indies society, except for the uppermost ranks of the government and the army. Only a few Indo-European men could be found in liberal professions. Economically, the Indo-European group was not bound to the 'Indisch' soil. They were 'an extension' of the Western European colonial rule, production and civil service. This intermediate group of 'Indische' boys were seen as forming the pillars of Dutch colonial authority on which the economy and welfare of the archipelago was based.[23] In the archives, no reference was made to the skin colour of Indo-Europeans who worked in the 'Binnenlands Bestuur' (the domestic colonial rule). This proves that racial considerations were not the only distinctive criterion. Class and cultural background were relevant as well.[24] In the second half of the nineteenth century, a temporary stay in the Dutch mother country, for example as a teenager at a boarding school, determined the career of Indo-Europeans. Within the group of (Indo) Europeans there was a distinction between those who could and those who could not send their children to the mother country for education.[25] In the 1920s and 1930s, approximately 30,000 people, who were born in the Dutch East Indies, stayed in the Netherlands for a shorter or longer period (including

Ill. 2   Indo-Europeans pose at a telescope in front of a house at the Marinelaan in Weltevre-den, Batavia, 1927.[26]

a considerable number of Indo-Europeans).[27] The Indo-Europeans who had complet-ed training or a job or internship in the Netherlands, were eligible for similar jobs in the colony.[28]

   For all Indo-Europeans, but especially the lower-class ones, it was important to stress that they were different from indigenous people. For example, J. Kloppenburg-Versteegh, who was of Indo-European ancestry herself, emphasises in her manual for good housekeeping in the Dutch East Indies that indigenous servants should be held in very low esteem. She explicitly expressed her racism with the words:

> In everything you will see that Javanese servants are not like European personnel but only machines. [...] Our servants are like big children.[29]

4.4   French Indochina: *Métis* as French people of the 'seconde zone'?

In French Indochina, the social status of the *Métis* was as complicated as in the oth-er settings. The policymakers and the *Métis* themselves found it difficult to identify where the *Métis* should be positioned in colonial society. In 1938, a report on the Eura-sian problem in Tonkin described this complexity:

> We cannot escape this dilemma, whether to assimilate the *Métis*, completely and totally in-
> corporate them in the French society and allow them a training without any limitation of
> obtaining the highest position like every other French person, or let them form a miser-
> able and dangerous caste.[30]

In Indochina, there were two types of migrants: the discharged military from the ex-
peditionary corps who stayed on as *colons*, and the French civilians who moved to the
colony in search of better work and opportunities.[31] In Indochina, from the early days
of the French conquest, and throughout the colonial period, there was also a steady
influx of people from the older French colony Réunion. Some of them pursued suc-
cessful careers as lawyers, civil servants, and teachers.[32] Colonists in Indochina sel-
dom arrived directly from metropolitan France.[33] The movement of modern imperi-
alism, together with construction and infrastructure works and capitalist expansion,
brought about significant changes in the composition of the population of Indochi-
na. This progress attracted more middle-class colonists and was accompanied by the
French *mission civilisatrice,* and the related ideal of *mise en valeur.* The French not only
stressed exploitation and economic development but also the moral and cultural pro-
gress of their colonies. This emphasis on the civilising mission was meant as a legiti-
misation of the colonial project at home.[34]

   The French colonial officials reserved specific jobs for *Métis*, as the British did for
the Anglo-Indians. In Indochina, these jobs were in trading and industry. In terms
of salary, the *Métis* – like their counterparts in the other settings – earned less than
European people performing the same jobs. Colonial officials discussed this issue,
since it was generally believed that *Métis* were well adapted to the tropical climate in
Indochina. This was a huge advantage for them, as well as for the colonial French
employer, because *Métis* were less often ill than the French.[35] In addition, they could
usually speak the indigenous language well. This was useful in various jobs, includ-
ing the police and commercial enterprises. In that sense, they were considered a *trait
d'union* between the French colonisers and the Vietnamese colonised people. In the
'imperial' survey of the Commission Guernut in 1937, colonial officials of several
provinces advocated equal pay and labour conditions for *Métis*. The reason was that
many of these naturalised French people were still treated as French people of the
seconde zone.[36] The Eurasian interest organisation *la Mutuelle des Francais d'Indochine*
promoted equal treatment regarding job allocation and salary. The *Mutuelle's* maga-
zine *L'Eurafricain* advocated hiring people who were born in the colony, usually *Métis*
people, instead of those who directly arrived from the French mother country to In-
dochina.[37]

   As already mentioned, miscegenation problematised the boundaries between colo-
niser and colonised in French Indochina. It led to a series of debates on who belonged
in the native category and who in the French one. Children born out of wedlock from
mixed unions between a French man and a native woman or raised by the father out-
side of marriage were never considered a problem. These children were considered
French citizens by colonial society. They had been recognised by their French fathers
or were married to French men and were therefore eligible for jobs in the colonial
government and civil services.[38] Only children who were abandoned by their French

fathers and had to grow up with their mothers in indigenous society were problematised. They had the legal status of indigenous people and both indigenous and French colonial society rejected them. These *Métis* children were received in orphanages of the *Fondation Brévié* (later FOEFI), because of the fear that this could be a potential destabilising factor in the colonial society of French Indochina.[39]

4.5 Comparison and conclusion: From 'encouragement' to an 'unhappy lot'

Overall, colonial rulers in all three colonial contexts struggled with 'the Eurasian Question' in the late colonial period. The two older colonies – the Dutch East Indies and British India – had different policies in that respect and those had repercussions for the position of Eurasians on the labour market. Indo-Europeans in the Dutch East Indies could reach a higher social position than Anglo-Indians in British India. From the perspective of many Indo-Europeans in the Dutch East Indies, Anglo-Indians in British India had a much harder, more difficult time under British colonial rule than they had under Dutch colonial rule. A separate Eurasian group such as the Anglo-Indians in British India did not exist in the Dutch East Indies until the start of the twentieth century.[40] The ideas about miscegenation were more liberal in the Dutch East Indies than in British India. According to Wertheim, the British colonial system had:

> [...] the most rigid colour line of all [...] Nowhere in the colonial world are the lines of caste drawn more rigidly: in clubs, residential areas, places of public accommodation, and informal cliques. Nowhere is the taboo on intermarriage stronger and the penalty for infraction more drastic.[41]

In the Dutch colony, social relations between indigenous people and Europeans were not at all equal. However, by comparison to British India, the Dutch East Indies seemed to be a zone of exceptional racial tolerance. Eurasians recognised by their European fathers were legally, if not socially, assimilated into the European population.[42] The Anglo-Indians were categorised as 'natives' and therefore they were regarded as less 'white' than the Indo-Europeans. However, the Indo-Europeans from the Dutch East Indies (especially the paupers) were often said to be a group that was economically as weak as the Eurasians from British India.[43] In both former colonial contexts, pauperism committees were formed to examine the problem of poor whites and Eurasians.

   Overall, European colonial society and the indigenous community ostracised Eurasians in all colonies, but the Indo-Europeans of the Dutch East Indies were considered to have fewer problems than the *Métis* in French Indochina and the Anglo-Indians in British India.[44] French colonial rule was generally considered the strictest, but the Anglo-Indians were considered to have the least favourable position according to many contemporaries. Anglo-Indians did not have access to European social circles, while Indo-Europeans could attend European events if they were upper-class.[45]

   French colonial rule was considered by some people *plus humaine* (more humane) than the form of colonial rule in the two older colonies. However, in practice this was not necessarily true. Racial boundaries were more strictly maintained in French Indo-

china in comparison with the Dutch East Indies, probably because the French colony was younger.[46] There is a difference between the colonial rhetoric and the outsider's perspective. In my view, the situation of Eurasians in the three colonial contexts can be placed on a scale: from rather inclusive racial tolerance in the Dutch East Indies, via selective racial tolerance in French Indochina to strict racial hierarchy in British India. A 1955 book illustrates this by stating that while the Dutch East Indies adopted a policy of 'encouragement' regarding the Indo-Europeans, Indochina implemented a policy of 'belated and spotty legal protection' of *Métis* people, and the Anglo-Indians were 'an unhappy lot'.[47] These ideas influenced the possibilities for Eurasians to receive an education in the mother country, as well as to acquire a job and reach a higher social and economic status. Education and economic status could be decisive when facing the decision between staying or leaving after decolonisation.