

The Meaning of White: Race, Class, and the ‘Domiciled Community’ in British India 1858-1930

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Some years ago, in the midst of a conversation about tourism and travelling, a friend from one of Britain's former colonies remarked how shocked she had been to see 'white people begging' during her first trip abroad to Australia. The comment puzzled me, but my friend explained that she had grown up surrounded by a widespread belief that poverty was a predominantly 'non-white' condition and it was only after leaving her country to travel abroad that she came to realize how inaccurate this idea was.

I was reminded of this episode while reading Satoshi Mizutani's stimulating book on the meaning of 'whiteness' in colonial India. While I do not wish to suggest that my friend's opinion could be traced exclusively to former British colonial policies of race and class in her country, I do think that this episode can be interpreted as a testimony to the timeliness and social relevance of Mizutani's work. To be exact, the book is not without precedent in its choice of topic. Three decades ago, David Arnold's pioneering study on orphans and vagrants in 19th-century India drew attention to the many divisions of class, race and gender which challenged the 'illusion', as he called it, of a homogenous, elite European community in colonial India. The last decade has witnessed a renewed interest in the topic, with more research being produced on European 'subaltern' or marginal groups such as prostitutes, 'loafers' or vagrants, sailors and railway workers.⁽¹⁾ As Mizutani himself confesses (pp. 3–4), much of this research is theoretically indebted to Ann Laura Stoler's seminal work on colonial Southeast Asia, in which she examines racism as a pervasive and institutionalized practice of the colonial state – rather than the simple manifestation of a peculiar psychological disposition – which intersected with ideologies of gender, sexuality and class to produce subjects of imperial rule and simultaneously conceal the colonizers' own anxieties.⁽²⁾

In *The Meaning of White*, Mizutani challenges conceptions of 'whiteness' in colonial India, more specifically the period from 1858 to 1930, as a universal or generic category. His analysis focuses on India's so-called 'domiciled community', which consisted of persons of mixed Indian and European descent, as well as Europeans of unmixed parentage who made the subcontinent their permanent place of domicile, as opposed to the bulk of civil servants, businessmen and army officers for whom the country represented only a temporary destination. According to Mizutani, members of the domiciled community were 'identified as a problem' (p. 3) – commonly described as the 'Eurasian Question' – by colonial administrators on account of their race and place of domicile, but also due to their widespread pauperism which set them apart from the 'respectable' strata of British colonial society. As a result of this ideological differentiation, members of the domiciled community came to be perceived as 'ambiguous' whites, whose position within the colonial order was a matter of intense debate and negotiation. Focusing on the categories of race and class, but making occasional reference to gender as well, the book documents the specific ways in which the colonial state constructed the domiciled community as a problem and the strategies it devised to solve it.

Chapter one begins by identifying the 'ideal' British colonizer in India with those Britons who did not reside permanently in the subcontinent and shows how the domiciliary criterion came to be regarded as a *sine qua non* of 'whiteness' through its association with hierarchical notions of race and class. Following a common line of argument among historians of South Asia, Mizutani describes the Indian revolt of 1857 as a turning point in British self-perceptions of their rule in India. If, during the early decades of the 19th century, imperial prestige was still largely connected to the romanticized figure of the wealthy, partly-naturalized British 'nabob', after 1857 racial boundaries became increasingly rigid and imperial prestige came to rest predominantly on an ideology of difference and distance. Distinctions existed not only between Europeans and Indians but, significantly for Mizutani's argument, within the British colonial society as well. Thus certain sections of the British society, in particular labourers and subordinate soldiers, came to be regarded as unworthy exponents of Britain's civilizing mission, quite unlike members of 'respectable' professions such as civil servants, doctors, lawyers or missionaries. The preservation of British prestige in the colony depended on the ability to avoid 'degeneration', which could result from exposure to the unfavourable climate of India, as well as miscegenation and the failure to provide suitable education for children in Britain, away from the physical, cultural and moral dangers of India and its domestic servants. According to Mizutani, 'whiteness' in India was very much a 'middle-class affair' (p. 46), one that reflected the bourgeois sensibilities of Victorian Britain and rested significantly on the spatial differentiation of colony and metropolis.

More concretely, who were the people subsumed under the category of the 'domiciled community' and how did their numbers compare with those of the non-domiciled European population in India? Chapter two provides an answer to these questions. Based on the reports of two committees on pauperism, as well as census returns (which did not actually use the domiciliary criterion to distinguish between Europeans), Mizutani estimates that at the beginning of the 20th century there were approximately 93,000 non-domiciled

Europeans, 47,000 domiciled Europeans and 160,000 Eurasians in India (p. 72). Due to the impoverished state of many of its members, the domiciled community sometimes overlapped with another colonial category, that of the 'poor whites'. The latter consisted mainly of sailors, soldiers, railway workers, vagrants, widows and orphans, whose numbers increased steadily after the abolition, in 1833, of the licence system which had allowed the East India Company to control the entrance of Europeans into India. Unlike the 'poor whites', members of the domiciled community were classed as 'Natives of India' under the Government of India Act of 1870, a denomination which also included Eurasians or persons of mixed descent. As Mizutani argues, colonial commentators justified the 'otherness' of the domiciled and Eurasian group by appeal to an 'ideology of colonial degeneration' (p. 67). In terms of policy, one consequence of this distinction was that poor, non-domiciled whites could be repatriated to Britain, whereas domiciled Europeans and Eurasians could not. Despite such differences, it is important to emphasize the high degree of overlapping between the 'poor whites', 'domiciled Europeans' and Eurasians, which is evident throughout the book. The pauperism which afflicted many domiciled Europeans and their gradual assimilation, through marriage, into the Eurasian population were largely responsible for these flexible boundaries.

Chapter three turns to the discussion of the so-called 'Eurasian Question', a term used by colonial officials to describe the problems associated with poverty among persons of British descent in India. Significantly for the author's argument about the ambiguous 'whiteness' of the domiciled community, the 'Eurasian Question' did not concern only people of mixed descent, as the term would seem to imply, but also racially unmixed, domiciled Europeans. According to Mizutani, the above-mentioned committees on pauperism, launched in Calcutta in 1891 and 1918 to inquire into the problems of the European poor, framed their conclusions in a rhetorical language strikingly similar to the arguments about 'urban degeneration' which had informed the activity of similar committees in late 19th-century Britain (p. 95). The pauperism of the domiciled population was explained either as a 'psychological disorder', which stemmed from its members' inability to reconcile their mixed racial background with their (inappropriate) desire to identify with the bourgeois, non-domiciled Britons, or as a disorder of environment, both colonial and urban, since many of the domiciled poor lived in slums where they were exposed to dirt, vice and immorality. In reality, Mizutani argues, the persistent poverty of the domiciled and Eurasian group was caused largely by the employment discrimination they faced, since both government institutions and private European businesses proved reluctant to recruit them. Instead of rectifying this situation, the colonial state devised alternative solutions to the 'Eurasian Question' based on the principles of discipline and isolation. Unsurprisingly, some of these strategies, such as maritime training, the establishment of farm colonies and migration, mirrored British or European antecedents in dealing with the problems posed by the urban poor.

These strategies are discussed in more detail in chapters four and five. Chapter four focuses on the educational policies of the colonial state aimed at the younger members of the domiciled community. Mizutani argues that, due to the high number of children among the domiciled poor, as well as the fact that administrators regarded poverty as a problem which perpetuated itself across generations, education emerged as a key solution to the 'Eurasian Question'. However, the form such education was supposed to take was far from clear. Some of the efforts to educate the domiciled children originated with the ecclesiastical establishment, with the support of the Government of India. One such example was the so-called Bishop Cotton's Scheme launched in Calcutta in the early 1860s with the help of the Viceroy, Lord Canning, which led to the establishment of 'European schools' in hill stations, as well as plain towns such as Howrah, Allahabad, Meerut and Cuttack. Like the European Education Code introduced in 1887, the scheme failed to solve the 'Eurasian Question' since many children remained illiterate or outside the remit of these measures. As Mizutani points out, the education provided was of a general nature, not a practical one, and it was not compulsory. Furthermore, the children who attended such schools continued to be exposed to the damaging influences of their 'non-European' environment, a fact which seriously jeopardized their 'correction' in the eyes of the non-domiciled community (p. 136).

Under these circumstances, as chapter five shows, child removal and juvenile emigration emerged as the only viable solutions to the problems posed by the domiciled poor. Through the example of St Andrew's Colonial Homes, established by the Scottish missionary John Graham at Kalimpong at the beginning of the

20th century, Mizutani documents the turn in anti-poverty policies from education to 'housing reform, a tighter regulation of charitable relief, collective discipline and ... collective migration and resettlement' (p. 137). According to him, unlike previous attempts, the Homes had the double advantage of removing the children both 'from India as a space of native influence and the city as a place of slums' (p. 179). The Kalimpong children were isolated from their biological families and grew up in 'artificial families' organized according to Victorian and Edwardian ideas of domesticity, motherhood and discipline. The children were regarded as having been 'abandoned', despite the fact that in many cases their parents were still alive. This logic was applied to children of both mixed and unmixed descent, whose mothers were often dismissed as 'prostitutes'. Since the children were expected to 'labour back into the Empire' (p. 160), albeit as subaltern whites and potential migrants to Australia, New Zealand and Canada, great emphasis was placed on teaching them to perform domestic chores and training them as future farmers, seamen and artisans.

Finally, chapter six discusses the ways in which leaders of the domiciled community contested the colonial state's policy of whiteness. Predictably, some of the most important debates surrounded the issue of civil service employment and were voiced via organizations such as the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian Association and the Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European Association. As Mizutani shows, during much of the 19th century the domiciled community was caught between the colonial government's policies of Indianizing the lower ranks of the civil service on one hand and recruiting Oxbridge graduates for the higher positions on the other. In this context, members of the domiciled community were dismissed as unfit for such jobs: their repeated claims that they were white, Christian and spoke English as their mother tongue could not counter the fact that they had been educated in India and were 'not white enough' (p. 218). After the turn of the century, as the Home Rule Movement intensified, the rhetoric of the domiciled community changed from an emphasis on their 'whiteness' to an emphasis on their minority status. As Mizutani concludes, this was not simply a 'politics of racial proximity' but a serious contestation of British imperial privileges built on race and class and enforced through the "ideology of 'domicile'" (p. 218).

The Meaning of White is an engaging and well-written book which achieves its proclaimed aim of 'demystify[ing] the ideology of whiteness [and] situating it within the concrete social realities of colonial history' (p. 3). One wishes, however, that the author had paid more attention to the internal stratifications of the domiciled community itself, instead of choosing to focus on that part of it which was characterized as 'poor'. Anticipating such criticism, Mizutani writes that his argument should be interpreted as an '*immanent critique* of a form of colonial power that simultaneously highlighted and controlled poverty among Domiciled Europeans', not as a claim that 'its members were invariably poor' (pp. 5–6, original emphasis). Yet, one could turn the argument of the book around and ask: if the point is to show that 'whiteness' in colonial India was an ambiguous category, then is such neglect of difference within the domiciled community itself really justified? This is especially the case when such differences keep suggesting themselves throughout the book, for example when one attempts to identify the common thread which connected members of the domiciled community who lived in urban slums with the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian Association's requests for middle-range positions in the civil service (p. 193).

A similar argument could be made with regard to Mizutani's use of newspapers as sources of colonial views on the topic he examines. One is reminded here of Robin Jeffrey's pertinent statement in a different context that newspapers are 'often treated as if [they] were the same, and had the same effects, no matter the place or time'.⁽³⁾ This criticism can also be applied to the way in which Mizutani uses *The Friend of India*, later known under a variety of other names such as *The Friend of India*, *and Statesman*, *The Statesman and Friend of India*, etc., as a source of British, colonial, public opinion on the domiciled community. As the plethora of names themselves suggest, this newspaper went through significant transformations from its inception at the beginning of the 19th century as a missionary paper in Srirampur, to its rebirth as *The Statesman* a century later (Mizutani uses issues which cover roughly the period 1858–1930). More significantly, the newspaper was edited by a number of editors (sometimes co-editors) whose views were not always consistent with each other or unconditionally supportive of the British imperial project. It is certainly interesting that a person like Robert Knight, who bought the *Friend of India* in 1875, merged it with his *Statesman* and edited it with a few gaps until his death in Calcutta in 1890, could criticize the government

for impoverishing the Indian population and excluding Indians from the higher ranks of the civil service, while also dismissing the pleas of the domiciled poor, as Mizutani argues. As is well known, Knight was notorious among his Anglo-Indian peers for his 'pro-native' views and was even accused at one time of being a 'socialist'.⁽⁴⁾ Given the fact that Knight himself struggled to send his sons to study in Britain, one wonders whether he was not in fact negotiating his own 'whiteness' within the colonial order, coming as he did from a modest social background and belonging to an occupational group – journalists – whose 'professional' or 'respectable' status was far from obvious in 19th-century India.

These observations notwithstanding, Satoshi Mizutani's book is an enviable achievement and a valuable contribution to our understanding of the politics of race and class in colonial India. The book is part of a long and productive engagement with the study of South Asian history by Japanese scholars and deserves to receive wide attention from specialists and the general public alike.

Notes

1. David Arnold, 'European orphans and vagrants in India in the nineteenth century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 7 (1979), 104–27. More recent scholarship on this topic includes: Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India, 1860–1920* (Kolkata, 2008); Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2009); Aravind Ganachari, "'White man's embarrassment": European vagrancy in 19th century Bombay', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2002), 2477–86; Dorothy McMenamin, 'Identifying Domiciled Europeans in colonial India: Poor whites or privileged community?', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 3 (2001), 106–27; Deborah Nixon, 'Race, railways, and domiciled Europeans', *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, 3 (2008), 26–43.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ann L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NJ, 1995); Ann L. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robin Jeffrey, 'Testing concepts about print, newspapers and politics: Kerala, India, 1800–2007', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68 (2009), 486.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Edwin Hirschmann, *Robert Knight: Reforming Editor in Victorian India* (New Delhi, 2008), see especially pp. 50–54, 209–12, 220–4.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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