



# Mundan Parunki

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**Summary:** *The history of the Anglo-Indian community in Kerala through the book Mundan Parunki written by Francis Noronha.*

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I'm happy to have been born as an Anglo-Indian now. How can one celebrate life without any malice or bias? The story of every Anglo-Indian life is an attempt to answer that question. My knowledge of Malayalam is fragmented. It is with this limited skill that I attempt to tell my stories. My sweat and words bear the essence of a *mundu*-clad *Parunki*.<sup>1</sup>

- Francis Noronha, *Mundan Parunki*, 2020

Anglo-Indians emerged as a mixed community with the advent of Western traders and companies in India. While the name indicates that the community has British origins, it comprises people with other paternal ancestries like Portuguese and Dutch. These communities were referred to as *Parunkis* and *Lanthakar*, colloquially, in Kerala. The Malayalam name *Parunki* has its origins in the Arab word 'Farangi' (a corruption of "Frank"), and at present refers to both this community and everything Portuguese in general or associated with them.<sup>2</sup> Settled in coastal areas, they lived in financial marginalisation and social isolation. Francis Noronha covered these unknown aspects of the community in his autobiographical book, *Mundan Parunki*.

Francis Noronha was born in 1972 in a small village in Alappuzha to Cleetus and Barbara Noronha. He established his career as an author with the release of the novel *Asharanarude Suvishesham*. He released *Mundan Parunki* in February 2020 as a tribute to his Anglo-Indian origins. Noronha describes an instance where he attended a seminar with four other writers at UC College to talk about their lives and writing.<sup>3</sup> His lecture from the seminar was turned into an article, following the suggestion of journalist K.C. Narayanan.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Noronha, *Mundan Parunki*, (Kottayam: Malayala Manorama, 2020), 5.

<sup>2</sup> J Devika. "Cochin Creole and the perils of casteist cosmopolitanism: Reading Requiem for the Living", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 51(1), (2016): 128.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Francis Noronha, 10 March 2024.

This article later became a book published by Malayala Manorama. Noronha's work is personal and intimate as he unfolds the origin of his family and the history of his community while talking about his relationship with his identity.

## Of Home, Identity, and Nationality

In the work, he dedicates specific chapters to his family members, like his mother, Barbara Noronha (nee Gonzalves), and grandmother, Victoria Noronha, and even to the life events that shaped him as a human being and a writer. Along with his life story, he dedicates the book's third chapter to the brief history of the Anglo-Indians of Portuguese descent, or *Parunkis*.

The origin of the *Parunkis* of Kochi is associated with Afonso de Albuquerque's policy of establishing a reliable Portuguese presence, thereby creating a loyal population. For this reason, Portuguese men were encouraged to marry local women and settle down.<sup>4</sup> The *casados* (married settlers), who married Indian women, were discharged from the Portuguese army and settled down as tradesmen or merchants, often securing considerable wealth. Thus, the population that continued to increase in Cochin was the *mestics*, the progeny of mixed marriages. Noronha states that the *Topasses* and *Mestizo* were the first Anglo-Indians to settle in Kerala.

The Anglo-Indians in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry have their own culture and identity.<sup>5</sup>

Kochi remained the motherland of the Anglo-Indian community in Kerala, as it was the region where the Anglo-Indians settled first; later, the population spread to adjacent regions. They also live in other parts of Kerala, like Kannur and Kozhikode in the north and Kollam in the south—the coastal towns of Kerala. In these towns, the Anglo-Indians often lived in a closed

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<sup>4</sup> Devika, 2016, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Noronha, 2024.

community that isolated themselves from other sections of society. This was often done to prevent the intermingling of their unique Anglo-Indian practices and cultural traditions.

These communities of mixed-bloods, including Portuguese, Dutch, and British, were first known as East Indians, which was superseded by the term "Eurasians" by the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1911, the term "Anglo-Indian" officially designated the people who used to be included under the category mentioned above. They were defined as Europeans through their paternal ancestry and domicile, as encapsulated by the first legal definition in the Government of India Act of 1935, and this was continued post-independence.

Noronha recalls that the Anglo-Indians of British origins opposed the generalisation and claimed that they were a bona fide community and were different from Parunkis. He explains this difference as there being two types of Anglo-Indians in Kerala: the ones who wore a *mundu* (unstitched cloth worn below the torso by both men and women in Kerala; equivalent to *dhoti*) and the ones who did not.<sup>7</sup> He explains this aspect by narrating an incident from his teenage years, where he accompanied his uncle to join the Anglo-Indian Association of Kerala and was humiliated for wearing a mundu and shirt, unlike the suit-clad Anglo-Indians of British origin. This infuriated him and other members of the Parunki community, which led to the formation of the Alleppey Anglo-Indian Association (renamed the Kerala Anglo-Indian Association).<sup>8</sup> However, despite the schism within the community, Noronha adds that harmony did exist. While their separate associations segregated these groups, their customs were similar. In Noronha's words:

Both groups welcomed the New Year with the same gusto. Both of them burned the Santa effigy, drank wine, and danced to the tunes of the guitar. When intoxicated, they fought about their prestige in the most eloquent English and colloquial Malayalam.<sup>9</sup>

While both Anglo-Indians and the European settlers shared European parentage from the male side, Anglo-Indians were born in India before Independence and, unlike most Europeans, expected to die in their motherland.<sup>10</sup> Noronha adds that Anglo-Indians were the only community opposed to the departure of colonisers from India, as they feared social exclusion and wished to remain under their protection. Thus, they saw their foreign descent as a way to have a better life and considered Europe their fatherland. This identification of space existed simultaneously with the increasing identification of India as a motherland.

Anglo-Indians were the only community who were dissatisfied with the fact that India became independent from the European powers. They lit candles with the prayer that the nation would remain under the British forever.<sup>11</sup>

## Rituals and Celebrations

While discussing the community's lifestyle, Noronha states that their motto was to enjoy and celebrate life, no matter their situation. He adds that every chapter of life is celebrated, from birth to death. In this way, they were ready to celebrate everything, even if they had no income or source to do the same. To quote him:

During a birthday celebration, the father bought a cake while the house was decorated for the occasion. The family gathered and sang the birthday song. These occasions were incomplete

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<sup>6</sup> Hedin, E. 'The Anglo-Indian Community'. *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 2 (1934): p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Noronha, 2020, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Noronha, 2024.

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<sup>9</sup> Noronha 2020, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Noronha 2020, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Noronha, 2024.

without a bottle of wine. If it is a funeral, the body is dressed in a coat and suit, despite the family not having the money to buy food for the household.<sup>12</sup>

The funerals were elaborate, with the dead person adorned in formal wear, including a coat, suit, and boots, and holding a flower bouquet and laid out in a beautiful and decorated casket. The food served would be the favourite dish of the person who had passed. This custom had a regional variation in Kochi, where the food would include the delicacies—*pazham*, *pappadam*, and *payasam* (banana, pappad, and payasam are a traditional dessert combination in Kerala). The funeral procession would be accompanied by a crowd and a band playing instruments, bereaving the dead. Noronha adds that the musical procession was a foreign tradition unique to the Anglo-Indian community.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding other celebrations, he states that New Year was the only festival celebrated as a community gathering. In contrast, Easter and Christmas were celebrated with gusto but privately in one's household. These gatherings would pave the way for interactions between young men and women, leading to marriage proposals. Marriage in the Anglo-Indian communities was a celebration of love rather than convenient alliances. However, this custom changed when community gatherings declined, and families sought agencies to fix matrimonial alliances.

The wedding ceremony differs from other Christian weddings in Kerala, as the Anglo-Indian community does not incorporate any of the Malayali-influenced traditions like tying a *thali* (cross-shaped beads embedded on a leaf-shaped locket on a chain) around the bride's neck or gifting her a *viripavu* (a sari gifted from the groom's side during the wedding ceremony). The bride would wear a gown with a veil, which the groom lifts after they exchange

their wedding rings and are pronounced husband and wife. Noronha adds that the majority of Anglo-Indians preferred to marry within the community. This preference was significant for women, as it was the only way to retain their identity. The women were bound to change their surnames after marriage, and if they married outside the community, they lost their surname and, hence, their connection to the community. This norm was not compulsory for men, as their wives would be baptised post-marriage and take their husbands' surnames.

## Of Women and Men

An Anglo-Indian woman's worth was also judged by the quality of the wine she brewed and the meat she cooked.<sup>14</sup>

Women (referred to colloquially as *Chattakarīs*) were an important part of the community as they ran the household. Noronha explores the significance of women in an Anglo-Indian household by dedicating chapters of the book to his paternal grandmother, Victoria Noronha, who suffered due to her gambling-addicted, spendthrift husband losing their home during a game. They had to register under a government housing scheme enacted by the EMS government, the first elected communist government in Kerala. She raised Noronha's family by working in the coir industry and raising poultry. He remarks that the men (also known as *Sayyip* or *Sayiv*, which were corrupted forms of the word *Saheb*) used to indulge in gambling under the influence of alcohol, which compelled the women to act as breadwinners for the sake of the household.

## Being Absorbed into the Latin Catholic Fold

Although the life, culture, and traditions of Anglo-Indians in many ways reflected

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<sup>12</sup> Noronha, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Noronha, 2024.

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<sup>14</sup> Noronha, 2020 p. 62.

European life in India, many of its members were also marked as visibly and audibly different through their mixed racial appearance and distinctive accents. They seemed to have blended more with the Latin Catholics, who lived in the coastal regions of Kerala. Hence, they were often misunderstood as indigenous Latin Catholics, even though both communities had different lifestyles. The Anglo-Indians attended their Sunday mass service, which is entirely in English, in the evening. They also devotedly followed the practice of praying every evening before dinner and saying good night to older people in the family with a kiss.

The blending of Anglo-Indian and Latin Catholics led to the dissolution of many Anglo-Indian traditions, which were replaced by Latin Catholic norms. Noronha says that many practices, like having a genealogy chart (used to trace one's ancestry to one's Portuguese forefathers) hung in the living room and a stand outside to hang one's hats and coats, are now missing in Anglo-Indian families<sup>15</sup>. This phenomenon, Noronha adds, occurred in rural coastal towns, not in cities like Kochi.

## Conclusion

The major characteristic of this work is that the Anglo-Indian community lives at a junction of home, identity, and nationality. The author expresses this sentiment by claiming that he would defy his foreign roots by wearing a mundu or refusing to be addressed by his foreign surname. In his words:

My surname 'Noronha' stung my heart as it reminds me of the fact I'm a progeny of a mixed race.<sup>16</sup>

He adds that while researching for his book, he learned that the Portuguese army that attacked Muslim devotees bound for

Mecca and set their ship ablaze was ordered by their viceroy, Antonio Noronha. To quote him:

That was such a cruel crime to commit. When I study this history, I realise that I am at the end of that generation. It's a name of pain and humiliation.<sup>17</sup>

However, as a writer, he believes that he is bound to love the poor, suffering, and pain. Hence, he carries that pain as his name and culture as his ethnic identity, explaining those conflicting emotions in this work. Thus, *Mundan Parunki* successfully paints a raw and authentic image of a marginalised community that has been misrepresented in popular culture.

## Acknowledgement

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Francis Noronha, whose invaluable assistance and support greatly contributed to the completion of this article.

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<sup>15</sup> Noronha, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Noronha, 2020, p. 51.

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<sup>17</sup> Noronha, 2024.

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