

Researching the Anglo-Indian Ethnic Minority Community in Odisha-A Methodological Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of the Anglo-Indian community in Odisha, India, using qualitative research methods to capture the complexities of their identities, cultural adaptations, and resistance to marginalization. Employing focus groups, house meetings, and unstructured interviews, the research delves into personal narratives, social dynamics, and cultural patterns within this ethnic minority group. By engaging community members in open, conversational settings, the study uncovers rich, contextual data that goes beyond mere statistical analysis, providing deeper insights into the community's ongoing negotiation of identity amidst societal change. The research challenges stereotypes and aims to present a non-sensationalized, nuanced understanding of the community's reality. Through the application of qualitative techniques, this work contributes to a more empathetic and comprehensive understanding of ethnic minority experiences, emphasizing the fluid and dynamic nature of ethnic identity in the context of post-colonial India. The study also highlights the role of community narratives in fostering social cohesion and activism, particularly in the face of political and social challenges

In order to fully comprehend the lived experiences of ethnic minorities, research approaches must be adaptable and able to capture the depth, complexity, and subtleties of their reality. Because they enable researchers to delve into the subjective experiences of people and groups, qualitative research methods are especially well-suited for this purpose. These techniques offer insights that go beyond statistical data and a more comprehensive understanding of topics like identity creation, cultural adaptability, marginalisation resistance, and social dynamics within ethnic communities. As a distinct strategy for obtaining comprehensive, rich data that can shed light on the varied experiences of ethnic minorities is provided by popular qualitative methods like focus groups, house meetings, and interviews, became my methods of choice. Each of these qualitative methods brings unique strengths to the study of ethnic minorities, providing researchers with the tools needed to uncover personal narratives, social structures, and cultural patterns. I used these methods, to explore how my ethnic minority community negotiated their identities, adapted to societal changes, and resisted marginalization, which I hoped would ultimately contributing to a richer, more empathetic understanding of their lived experiences.

I was not limited in any way, by the difficulties that researchers face while surveying ethnic minority groups like the Anglo-Indians of Odisha, such as low frequency in the population, difficult to access or being geographically unclustered. One Anglo-Indian family living in Berhampur was contacted over the phone, another senior from Jharsguda , contributed his experiences, while the rest of our respondents were available in the twin cities of Bhubaneswar and Cuttack and the railway town of Jatni. To the best of our knowledge, there are no Anglo-Indian families living in other parts of Odisha.

The Anglo-Indians in Odisha fit the definition of an ethnic group as defined by Bulmer:

collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance(Bulmer,1999).¹

Weedon, quoting Weeks' theorizations on identity, says: "Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality"(Weedon,2004)² Weedon himself believes that , "this is a world in which the legacies of colonialism, including migration and the creation of diasporas, along with processes of globalization have put taken-for-granted ideas of identity and belonging into question" ³.

Referring to cultural hybridity, Alison Blunt, refers to Bhabhas' in-between space' – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture"(Blunt, 2005) ⁴. This 'space' plays a role in making identity and is in a constant state of flux and transition (Khan,2016) ⁵. Thus, Shope, in his article on Anglo-Indian identity, mentions a "production of identity", especially of the hybrid or mixed races ", that is marked simultaneously by continuity and change" (Shope, 2004)⁶.

I kept in mind that ethnic identity is flexible, not static, and liable to change as social circumstances change and set out to test Andrews' suggestion 'that while Anglo-Indian identity is fluid, variable and changing, it was not in a state of crisis'⁷ Karlsen and Nazroo(2006) mention that ethnic minority groups must be conscious of being a part of that group and choose the characteristics (for ex. language, ancestry) they wish to use to define themselves, though stereotypes imposed by others may influence these choices.⁸ To identify my groups, I went by the practice of the UK's Office of National Statistics(ONS), quoted in Font and Mendez(2013)⁹.

[Because) membership of an ethnic group is something that is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned [...] we are unable to base ethnic identification upon objective, quantifiable information as we would, say, for age or gender. And this means that we should rather ask people which group they see themselves as belonging to (ONS 2003:9).¹⁰

My respondents were unanimous that they were all 'Anglo-Indians', and that is how they saw themselves, while most chose not to discuss any stereotype in the initial stages of our enquiry. I focused on using oral testimony to capture the memories and lived experiences and compared it with textual research and our own impressions and analysis of the discussions. The first method, that I settled for was focus groups, as I attempted to capture the narratives and lived experiences of my respondents. A focus group discussion is a technique where a researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw understandings from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Morgan, 1996)¹¹. **Krueger and Casey (2014)**¹² and **Stewart and Shamdasani (2014)**¹³ highlight the importance of using focus groups in applied research, emphasizing the value of group dynamics in revealing complex insights . **Kitzinger (1994)** discusses how the group interaction in focus groups can generate new perspectives, providing valuable insights that may not emerge through isolated individual interviews ¹⁴.

There were some important considerations in favour of using focus groups . Firstly this method can possibly yield more information than individual interviews or surveys because they allow

members to express their ideas and opinions in a lively group environment. Secondly, these groups concentrate on producing rich, contextual data as opposed to quantitative approaches, which are more concerned with numbers and statistical linkages. Finally, focus groups are particularly valuable when studying communities, that face common challenges (like the Anglo-Indians), as they provide insight into how group identity and solidarity form in response to social pressures and discrimination. Kitzinger highlights how focus groups are not just about gathering data but also about understanding the social processes within the group (Kitzinger, 1994).

As focus groups are commonly employed to investigate cultural norms, group dynamics, subjective experiences, and collective viewpoints, I formed two groups, with twelve participants each. **Krueger and Casey (2014)** discuss the importance of careful participant selection to ensure that the group is homogeneous enough to facilitate discussion but diverse enough to generate varied viewpoints so I included participants with ages ranging from the age of 20 to 87 years. One group comprised Anglo-Indians residing in Odisha; the second was Anglo-Indians originally from Odisha but presently residing in other states or countries. **Barbour (2007)** stresses the importance of creating an open, supportive environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts so I endeavoured, to the best of my ability, ensure the same. The participation of two Anglo-Indian MLAs (one from a railway town) and one former Member of Parliament in the focus group enriched the discussions and added perspective. In order to tell those stories, I paid particular attention to the senior citizens in the focus group and the community as they were more likely to have experienced much more as they had been born before and around Independence. I organised three focus group meetings, two in September and October 2020 and one in October 2021.

The second method that I employed was house meetings, a technique developed in 1950s California, when Salinas Valley farm workers were being organised by Ross, Chavez and Huerta (Shaw, 2008) 16. House meetings, a technique developed in the 1950s, are deliberative group conversations with six to twelve participants who know each other (Cortes, 2006) 17. Such meetings create a space to have a dialogue about issues that matter to a community (Kong, 2010) 18. The fact that I was a member of the community and an insider was also helpful in gaining access to community members.

The purpose of house meetings, are typically informal, and aim to promote communication within a household or group. They let people to talk about common issues or come to decisions collectively, whether in co-living facilities, dorms, communities, or even within organisations. According to Green (2015), house meetings are crucial for talking about shared duties, planning group activities, and resolving problems that could otherwise lead to conflict if ignored 19. The main goal of house meetings is to provide a forum for open dialogue and collaborative decision-making, which strengthens social ties and enhances group cohesion (Cohen, 2006) 20. The community in Odisha, is going through a lot of change which has affected relationships so this was an important consideration in employing this method. Helping participants form relationships, coming out of isolation and sharing personal narratives is another objective of home meetings (Kong, 2010; Auerbach, 2009) 21. Thus, I hoped that this method would foster interaction through regular face-to-face meetings which is especially valuable in communities where members might not interact outside of the meeting Parker (2012) 22.

However, owing to the breakdown in community relations, and the lack of infrastructure to meet as a group, meeting between community members is irregular. Even though, Green (2015) emphasizes that regular meetings help prevent small issues from growing into larger, more

divisive problems and this method seemed appropriate I noted that the community was also beset by internal conflict and had formed itself into small groups comprising family or friends. In some cases, even close family members were part of different groups which made conducting these meetings difficult. However, I was also careful to ensure that all the members were equally encouraged to participate is a key factor in the success of house meetings (Parker,2012). I conducted twelve house meetings in the homes of our respondents, with at least seven different families participating in each.

Both these methods, house meetings and focus groups employ the strategy of group conversation and encourage connection between participants and the telling of stories based on lived experiences, which is in line with what I was trying to achieve. More importantly, I was conscious that oral narratives typically include elements' which the narrators regard as the unvarnished truth... of archetype, stereotype or myth' (Burke,1992)23.

Scheduling regular meetings with my respondents was not easy in spite of most of them being retired, as they had busy schedules or were at times, not in the mood to discuss the past. As the need to accommodate everyone can result in delays, (Parker,2012), I proceeded to introduce my next method i.e, interviews. I began by interviewing those who were available and willing to be interviewed. I also interviewed members of the local communities who had lived or worked with Anglo-Indians and knew the community.

I kept my interviews informal and unstructured because unlike structured interviews with rigid, pre-determined question lists, unstructured interviews are much more flexible. Besides unstructured interviews are a key qualitative research method that allow researchers to delve deeply into participants' personal experiences and viewpoints through open-ended conversations which is exactly what I intended to do. This allowed me to adjust my questions based on how the conversation flowed. This flexibility is crucial for exploring complex issues, understanding individual perspectives, and gathering in-depth, nuanced information.

When examining marginalised or difficult-to-reach communities, in order to better comprehend people's lived experiences, ethnographic research, psychological studies, and sociological investigations commonly employ unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews are also in qualitative assessments and clinical contexts when the objective is to investigate complicated emotions, beliefs, and behaviours that call for a customised, nuanced approach with the interviewer and interviewee co-creating meaning thus emphasising the conversational nature of the interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000)24. I normally began my interview with a broad, open-ended question and allowed my interviewees to direct the conversation. Depending on the interviewee's answers , I followed up with spontaneous questions that helped uncover subtle nuances which offered better understanding as the open-ended questions I used elicited personalized, deep responses(Kvale,1996)25. This strategy, in my opinion, is especially helpful when exploring delicate and sensitive subjects or gaining a thorough grasp of complex social phenomena that are difficult to record using organised data collection techniques. (Patton, 2002)26.

As Odisha's Anglo-Indians were understudied and my research aimed to gather personal, first-hand accounts and experiences that went beyond cursory answers (Bhopal, 2004),27 these interviews seemed appropriate. Besides, the open nature of unstructured interviews made them especially effective in my research on the Anglo-Indian ethnic minority where the tales and memories were also expected to reveal complex cultural, social, and psychological processes. Additionally, Bhopal (2004) points out that unstructured interviews let researchers examine

how race, ethnicity, and class intersect by letting participants define their own experiences free from preconceived notions or queries. More significantly, these interviews create a more relaxed, rapport-building atmosphere that may stimulate interviewees to disclose details that would be awkward or challenging to talk about in a more formal or structured context, especially when researching delicate topics like discrimination, identity or trauma (Patton, 2002).

I did face some challenges in comparing responses owing to the absence of a fixed set of question which led to some inconsistency in responses, across interviews but this challenge may be ignored, as we aimed to capture the memories and lived experiences which may not be the same for different individuals. Though Willis' ethnographic study shows how unstructured interviews are useful for understanding social dynamics, identity formation, and lived experiences within marginalized communities, owing to the extensive, varied, and subjective nature of the responses, data analysis was frequently time-consuming (Willis, 1977)²⁸. I tried to overcome this problem, by trying to be conversational and using some closed-ended questions. I also sometimes introduced a topic or shared an anecdote that any of our respondents had shared and then just listened to the response of my interviewee.

Several of my respondents became misty eyed while recounting their memories while one gentleman broke down completely. This was quite unlike our preliminary assessment where several of our respondents, gave us the impression that though they had fond memories of their earlier lives, they had come to terms with how much it had changed. The younger generation were happy to share their thoughts and were interested in hearing stories of the past as they felt that it would keep the culture and way of life alive in the minds of future generations. Though the first author is of the exact ethnic origins as the respondents, we did not experience any adverse effects when discussing controversial or taboo topics and neither were there worries about confidentiality that may arise when respondents are ethnically matched to the interviewer, who may be from a relatively small community (Grewal and Ritchie, 2006)²⁹.

Finally, I attempted to use the community narratives method to round off my study. As quantitative approaches sometimes ignore the process of life events and are not capable of capturing the changes experienced by community members which is quite often through narratives and stories. The use of "story" and "narrative" seeks to elicit deep, comprehensive, and ecological understandings, from stakeholders in order to ultimately depict a community context. (Jason and Glenwick, 2016)³⁰. Thus a community narrative is a shared narrative that brings a group of people together and gives them a shared understanding of their history, beliefs, and experiences. These stories, whether passed down orally, in writing, or in contemporary digital media, are crucial for creating a sense of community, fostering social identity, and serving as powerful catalysts for social change. Because they offer a framework for resistance, flexibility, and change and are crucial for social cohesion, activism, and community empowerment, community narratives take on particular significance during times of social and political upheaval which in light of the removal of the constitutional safeguards for the community and the break down in community relations, are relevant.

I planned to empower my community members by involving them and taking a collaborative approach. As a result, I organised a community meeting on 14th October 2021, which was attended by seventy-two Anglo-Indians, in which I briefed the gathering on the objectives of my study. However, owing to pandemic-related fears, some seniors could not attend. In December 2021, I was part of an initiative to organise a Christmas Tree, an event which is held on Christmas Eve, for children where a Santa Claus distributes gifts and treats which is

followed by a ride on an open truck, with Santa ,singing Christmas carols. I met several seniors at this event. However, organising the community meeting and the Children's Christmas Tree event, was not cost-effective so, once the community had been informed on what I was doing, I opted not to continue with this method.

Following this, there were follow-up meetings at social gatherings and community functions in 2023. Rappaport (2000),mentions that stories privilege the voices of the people that are being studied and research subjects often become co-participants because of story-based questions³¹.I followed McAdams' (2006),life story methodology to prompt my respondents to share their personal stories ³². I asked my participants to share their stories on change in their lives and once they had become comfortable , followed up with belief or value- based questions.

There are at least two ways for community members' personal stories to become community narratives(Olson,et. al. 2016) ³³.The first was to ask my community members about the history and personal stories of their community and the second method was to code a collection of individual stories from community members and use the themes that surface among community members as community narratives . I used both methods for the purpose of this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to fully understand the lived experiences of ethnic minorities, such as the Anglo-Indians in Odisha, research must embrace adaptable, qualitative approaches that allow for the deep exploration of individuals' subjective experiences, identities, and cultural practices. Through methods like focus groups, house meetings, and unstructured interviews, I was able to capture rich, personal narratives that reveal the complexities and nuances of ethnic identity, cultural adaptation, and resistance to marginalization.

The use of focus groups enabled the exploration of group dynamics and social cohesion, highlighting the challenges and solidarity experienced by Anglo-Indians in response to societal pressures. House meetings further facilitated meaningful dialogue within the community, although internal conflicts and sporadic interactions posed challenges to this method. Unstructured interviews allowed me to uncover the deeply personal, often emotional stories of individuals, especially the older generation, whose memories and experiences serve as a valuable repository of community history.

Despite challenges like geographic dispersion and varying levels of participation, these methods helped create an empathetic understanding of the Anglo-Indian community in Odisha, demonstrating that ethnic identity is fluid, evolving, and deeply shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. The narratives shared by community members reflected a tension between continuity and change, with many older respondents expressing a sense of loss while the younger generation sought to preserve their cultural legacy.

Ultimately, the combination of these qualitative methods offered a comprehensive, multifaceted perspective on the community's lived experiences, shedding light on the subtle ways in which Anglo-Indians negotiate their identity and adapt to an ever-changing social landscape. The research underscores the importance of community narratives in shaping collective memory, fostering social identity, and providing a framework for resistance and social change, especially during times of upheaval. This study highlights the power of

qualitative research to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, ensuring that their stories are heard and understood within the broader context of Indian society.

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