

THE RISE OF THE COLOR BAR

1960 and 1951

John Strachey and N. C. Chaudhuri

In 1858, Great Britain transferred the control of India from the East India Company to the British crown. Doing away with the corrupt rule of the East India Company improved conditions in India considerably. Race, however, would play an increasing role in Britain's policy. In the first selection below, an Englishman describes his ancestors' change in attitude about skin color. In the second selection, an Indian recounts a legend explaining why the British were lighter-skinned than Indians.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Comparing

What are the similarities between the account by Strachey and the one by Chaudhuri?

John Strachey

Especially after the Indian Mutiny [of 1857], the fatal doctrine of racial superiority came more and more to dominate the imaginations of the British in India. Perhaps the deterioration in this respect can be made concrete from the records of my own family. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries two of my ancestors, Colonel Kirkpatrick and Edward Strachey, had married what the late-nineteenth-century British would, so offensively, have called native women. Kirkpatrick had married a Bengali lady of a distinguished family and Strachey a Persian princess. In each case, so far as the family records go, these marriages did not excite the least adverse comment or injure their careers in any way. How unthinkable such alliances [marriages] would have been to my great-uncles, Sir John and Sir Richard Strachey, who were members of the Governor-General's Council in the eighteen-seventies. This terrible withdrawal of genuine human community went far to undo . . . the immense improvement in British conduct [administration].

N. C. Chaudhuri

I have now to tell the story of another and a more serious problem of our relationship with Englishmen, or, to be more exact, with all Europeans—the problem of colour. Their fair complexion was a matter of great curiosity and still greater perplexity with us, and we wanted to know why they were fair and we were dark. One theory was that we had been darkened by the sun whereas they had been bleached by the cold, both of us travelling in opposite directions from a golden or rather brownish mean. . . . But one day a very close friend of mine told me a more

sensational story. He was the son of a wealthy landowner who was also one of the leading lawyers of the town. All the sons of this gentleman bore different names of the god Siva. The eldest was called Lord of the Word, the second Trident-Holder, the third Primeval Lord, the fourth Master of Serpents, and so on. The third, Primeval Lord, was my friend. I regarded him as particularly well-informed about the wider world, because he often went to Calcutta and had an uncle there who was one of the foremost lawyers of the High Court.

Now, one day Primeval Lord told me in great confidence that all English babies were actually born dark, even as dark as we were, but that immediately after birth they were thrown into a tub filled with wine and it was the wine which bleached their skin white. Primeval Lord added that the English fathers sat by the tub holding in their hand the pronged instrument [a fork] with which the English ate and watched if the babies were turning white within the expected time, and if they did not the fathers instantly thrust the pronged instrument down the throats of the babies and killed them. Primeval Lord did not improve on the story by pointing out its moral in so many words, but the hint was that if the English were fair they were so only because they were vicious. It was only through their alcoholism and cruelty that they got their fair complexion, while we were condemned to remain dark-skinned because we were not given to these vices.

Source: Excerpt from *The End of Empire* by John Strachey (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 55.