

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF CHINATOWN, KOLKATA

ABSTRACT

Change is an inevitable aspect of any society. It is either welcomed or resented but is nevertheless inevitable. The kind of change that takes place and the impact it has on the lives of people generates reactions which are decisive of the future of any community. The Chinese of Kolkata are a living example of a community which has since their migration to India, interacted and adapted to the dynamic changes that have impacted the community economically, politically, culturally and socially. This paper looks at changes taking place in the above mentioned areas by tracing shifts in the community's marriage patterns, occupation, language, education and migration. These parameters also have a major impact on how the community views itself vis-s-vis the society it inhabits and thus its identity formation.

The hustle bustle of Chinatown that the residents speak of with a sense of great nostalgia has now become a thing of the past. The community's population has dwindled drastically from 20,000-30,000 residents to mere 2,000-3,000 residents in the past ten years. The people left behind today belong mostly to the elder generation, who have a deep sense of attachment to the place with a significant number expressing their desire to be buried here. While on the other extreme the younger members of the community desire to migrate abroad, mostly to Canada. Thus the earlier phrase that was used when Chinese came to India 'One foot in India and One foot in China' now can be said to have changed into 'One foot in Canada and one foot in India'.

A study of the history of the community shows that the first Chinese man to come and settle in India was merchant-sailor Mr. Tong Achew. Over the years his journey to India and his settling here has become a part of the community's folklore. As people's historical memory goes, Mr. Achew while on an expedition to explore south east Asian countries during the 1780s, accidentally reached the port of Bengal, the then Capital of the British Empire. Seeking escape from the questioning and persecution by the British officials, he gifted Lord Hastings, the then Governor-General of colonial India, all that he was carrying on his ship which impressed him to the extent that the Governor-General promised to give him as much land as he could cover in one night on a horse back. This area was later named after him and came to be known as Achipur. Following the orders of Lord Hastings, Mr. Achew established the first sugar plantation and subsequently the

first sugar-mill. To meet the labour requirements needed for the same, Mr. Achew brought people from China, thus establishing the first Chinese settlement in India.

This paved the way for more Chinese to migrate to India at various periods in history due to multiple reasons. Jawhar Sircar (1990) says that, 'The forefathers of the modern day Calcutta Chinese came to India mainly during the turbulent years of the Kuamintang rule-those precarious decades between the Celestial Empire and Red China. The Second World War and Mao's Revolution also sent another lot to India...' (Sircar 1990: 65).

Today, the Chinatown in Kolkata is located in two different and distantly located areas namely Tangra and Terreti Bazaar. Tangra, which lies on the outer circles of the main city, is populated by the Hakka community who were and are still known for their mastery in leather tanning. Tangra was initially a marshy land and with the efforts of the community members the land was leveled and tanneries set up. Soon residential units came up along with the tanneries establishing the new China Town. Until the 1990's the Chinese living in Tangra were primarily engaged in the leather tanning industry. However, with the supreme court's order of 1996, banning tanneries in Tangra due to the environmental hazards of the work done and the dire impact it had on the residents, all tanneries operating in Tangra had to be shut down and shifted to the outskirts of the city, in Bantala. However, this was not the future for all the tanneries operating in Tangra. Barring the big established tanneries which relocated, the small-scale family run tanneries had to shut down completely. This resulted in a major change in Tangra's landscape. Many of the buildings which housed these tanneries were converted into small-scale workshops centered on finished leather products. Some were also turned into restaurants specialising in Chinese Cuisine. Thus, what was once a flourishing leather industry complex has now changed into the new gastronomic hub of the city.

The new workshops, restaurants and other informal jobs in and around Tangra attracted workers from Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Bihar. These migrant workers began to occupy the land that belonged formerly to the Chinese, who migrated abroad seeking better life opportunities. What was once a safe haven for the Chinese is now been occupied by the migrant workers, whose population has outnumbered the population of the Chinese. Another significant change that has taken place in Tangra today is the flourishing high rise apartment buildings which coexist with small independent houses that are now in dilapidated conditions.

Terreti Bazaar, the old Chinatown, which is almost twenty kilometres from Tangra is populated by the Cantonese, who have been traditionally engaged in carpentry, restaurant business, dentistry and salons.

Unlike the Hakka Chinese living in Tangra, who do not have any formal association or divisions amongst themselves, the Cantonese of Terreti are divided into different clubs which were formed on the basis of the different districts they migrated from China. The clubs provided people with a platform to get together for religious and other social events. These clubs also acted as shelter homes to the young migrants till they found a space to move out to in Kolkata.

The area is also famous for its breakfast bazaar, which serves authentic Chinese breakfast prepared and sold by the members of the community. The stalls are set from six am to nine am. However, with the increasing number of migration taking place the numbers of stalls selling Chinese cuisine has decreased drastically. It has traditionally also operated as a place where social gatherings took place on a daily basis, where people would come and interact with each other. But now with the diminishing breakfast culture, very few gather for their rendezvous.

The changes taking place not only affected the breakfast bazaar but also the Chinese schools in the area. Terreti had around six to seven schools when the Cantonese Chinese settled here, but gradually with the dwindling numbers, most of them are now closed down or converted to English medium schools, catering mostly to the locals.

Just a kilometer away from the breakfast Bazaar is Bow Barracks where the Anglo Indians resides. Over the years many Chinese have settled in the area due to intermarriage. However, with the increasing migration the population of Chinese living in Bow Barraks has decreased drastically, with only 24 families currently living there.

Thus, what is left behind in Kolkata is a small scattered community, trying to preserve their cultural past while simultaneously interacting and adapting to the current changes taking place culturally, economically, socially and politically. In the process many of the inherited practices of the community are dwindling while trying to keep up with the current changes. Preserving the language has been a major struggle which faces competition from the growing importance of English as well as the lack of people to facilitate its transmission. This has also had implications on the medium of education people receive in the community as well as communicating practices. Cultural practices unique to the community have also responded to the changes taking place. For instance, there have been shifts in

marriage practices where inter community marriages are now being accepted which was not very prevalent earlier. One of the major reasons for this has been the dwindling numbers of people from the community; hence there is a need for finding partners outside, which has gone hand in hand with the 'modern' practice of love marriages. Keeping up with the changes has also meant that many of the members of the community have taken up Christianity for easier access to English medium schools. A simultaneous shift can also be seen in occupational practices, where the major blow to the community in Tangra came with the Supreme Court ruling of 1996 which ordered the shutdown of tanneries in the area, and a subsequent relocation to Bantala. Leather tanning being an indigenous skill of the Hakkas, was the major source of employment for the community, and the order adversely impacted the community. Many small tanneries had to shut down because of their inability to meet the financial expenses required to shift to the new location. However the affluent tannery owners were able to relocate their business but majority of them ventured into restaurant, salon businesses and took up jobs in private enterprises. Major shifts are also visible in the old Chinatown in Tiretti bazaar, the most prominent one being the sharp decline of the famous Chinese breakfast bazaar offering traditional Chinese delicacies. The place is now being taken over by local and migrant vendors selling vegetables and poultry items.

When it comes to political representation, there is a lack of active participation from the community. Very few people contest for official political positions or take up government jobs. There is a feeling amongst the people that even if they were to take part in the political process, no one would be willing to accept them due to their different ethnic identity.

The lack of political representation and the feeling of 'not having a voice' add to their political passivity and the subsequent vulnerability.

Sporadic waves of economic instability as well as political and social vulnerabilities coupled with aspirations of a better lifestyle abroad have lead the Chinese of Kolkata to migrate to places like Canada and other south-east Asian countries. Canada's soft immigration policy and its reputation of being a country tolerant to diverse cultures have drawn the majority of Indo-Chinese migrations.

The vulnerabilities present amongst the community go back to the troubled Indio-China relation which was at its peak during the 1962 Indio-China war. The anxiety and the fear that the war perpetuated in the minds of people hasn't died out, the border issues between India and china still impacts the community. The volatile geopolitical relationship between India and China seen in the current Doklam tri-junction tension puts the Chinese community in Kolkata in a state of uncertainty which was also voiced out by few of the members of the community.

To get a holistic understanding of the dynamic nature of the Chinese community and how they have received and reacted to the changes, especially migration, we proceed to describe and analyse the major shifts that have taken place in occupation, education, language and other cultural and religious practices. These parameters have been selected as they play a vital role in forming a person's identity.

Occupation:

The occupation of the Chinese community traversed a diverse historical trajectory. The first Chinese settlers in West Bengal were the workers brought to work in the sugar plantation and factory by Mr. Achew in the 18th century. Since then the Chinese have been migrating to India seeking better employment opportunities. The political unrest in China during the last decade of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century sent a new wave of migrants to India. The Hakka and the Cantonese Chinese settled in two different areas in Kolkata. Traditionally, the Hakkas and Cantonese have had very distinct occupations. Cantonese, who were the first ones to migrate and settle in Terreti, were engaged as shipbuilders, carpenters and dentists. Some of them were also employed in the port areas and worked in ships.

Most of the Hakkas were traditionally skilled in leather work and continued with the profession when they settled in Tangra, Kolkata. Due to their work with leather, which gives out a bad stench and the negative social prejudices associated with leather tanning here, they did not find any central location in Kolkata. Thus, they had to settle in the marshy outskirts of Tangra, which they levelled into a suitable living area to establish their tanneries and homes.

Christopher, owner of a leather workshop in Tangra, recalls how his great grandfather, started a tannery here. He had to level the land to make the ground strong enough to support a tannery. This tannery, which he established, had to be converted into leather workshop post the Supreme Court ruling of 1996. Mr. Patrick Lee, a tannery owner in Bantala, pointed out that it was the Chinese who brought the skill of tanning to India and introduced leather products to Indian market. The availability of cheap raw material, the animal carcass of cows which were discarded in India during that time, in abundance made tanning and leather a flourishing business for many Hakkas.

The Hakka community had a major setback in 1996 when the Supreme Court ordered the shutdown of tanneries in Tangra due to ecological reasons. This episode had a huge toll on the community as many lost their only source of

livelihood. Many Tanneries had to shut down because of their inability to meet the expenses required to shift to Bantala, the new leather complex. What is left behind in Tangra today are only small workshops and factories making finished leather products like hand gloves, leg pads, abdominal guard etc. pertinently catering to sport equipment.

Tangra, which was once a commercial site for leather industry now serves as the gastronomic hub for people in Kolkata as more and more restaurants have come up in the area. These restaurants serve “Desi Chinese” cuisine which is very popular among the people of Kolkata. They cater to a mix crowd of people such as students, professionals, government officials and many others in the neighbourhood. As one walks through the narrow lane of Chinatown in Tangra, one can see many deserted tannery building. A good majority have been sold to Muslims, who are now engaged in leather business.

A significant number of restaurants in Tangra are run by woman entrepreneurs. One of the inspiring stories is that of Mrs. Monica Liu who is known as the ‘Don of China Town’. She is one of the most powerful people in Tangra with political and other influential links. Mrs. Liu owns one of the biggest restaurants in Tangra, ‘Beijing’ and she owns many other restaurants in Kolkata. This journey was not an easy one for her. In 1962 when the India-China war broke out she was taken to a refugee camp in Deoli, Rajasthan along with her entire family where she spend almost five years of her Childhood in miserable conditions. The food was bad and the rooms were crammed and she could not even sleep properly at night because of heat and mosquitoes. For them the most difficult time was when they came out of jail as they were now homeless. Her father didn’t want them to sleep on the streets or in the station, so to survive her family split up and stayed with different Chinese families, and sold momos, pao, etc. to survive. Within the next three-four years she got married and settled in Tangra, Kolkata. During her initial years of marriage she helped her husband in his tannery business, which was itself not very easy as this required lot of capital and labour. In 1991, she saw a building and took it on rent to start her very first restaurant Kim Ling. Today she is well established and other than the restaurant business, she also has beauty parlours and real estate.

Shutting down of tanneries thus, lead to economic instability, occupational crisis and erratic shift in the profession for the Hakkas. The Cantonese also had to go through a similar phase in the 1960's, when most of them were taken to jail or refugee camps because of the suspicion that they were spies from China.

Mr. Edward recollects how people were thrown into the streets once they were released from jail. They were left homeless and unemployed. They opened salons, sauce factory or restaurants mostly exploring entrepreneurial opportunities to sustain themselves.

The Indo-China war created an atmosphere of fear and distrust amongst the people and many of them migrated abroad. The impact of the rapid migration from Terreti can be seen in the Breakfast Bazaar. Many Chinese vendors used to sell sticky rice, steamed and baked buns, momos and other Chinese food items and people from the community and others living nearby would come and have breakfast there. But over the years the Chinese stalls have decreased in numbers and the market now has more vendors from other communities selling vegetables and poultry items in the bazaar. It is interesting how some of the local vendors have started to sell Chinese food items which they have learnt over the years by working with them.

Interestingly none of the members of the community, either from Cantonese or the Hakka community are interested in applying for government jobs in India. Dr. Tathagata Neogi, an archaeologist and founder of Heritage Walks, Kolkata, who is currently doing research on the community, mentioned that the reluctance to join public services was due to fear and uncertainty coming from the fact that they are a minority diasporic community. The prolonged border tension between India and china, the volatile bilateral relationship coupled with the bitter experience of the war has discouraged them to aspire for the bureaucratic posts. Many from the community opined that they were not interested in government services or they assumed that their chances to get selected were very low because of their distinct ethnic identity. Less remuneration in government jobs and their preference to be entrepreneurs were some of other reasons why people from the community did not want to apply.

The younger generation today mostly aspires to migrate and look for better job opportunities abroad. They have taken up professional courses like hostel management, computer engineering, fashion technology etc. which, according to them, has more scope abroad.

Education:

Education is one of the primary pillars of society, where the schools being an early agent of secondary socialisation moulds the students sense of self and their relationship to the wider community. Amongst the Chinese of Kolkata, the medium of education has played an important role in determining the cultural artefacts they

hold dear. This also holds key to their future opportunities which would enable the community's sustenance in the changing situation.

For most of the ancestors of the people residing in Chinatown today, holding on to the culture they brought with themselves was one important factor while settling in. Thus, the oldest generation has mostly been educated in Chinese medium schools which came up simultaneously with the Chinese settling in Kolkata. The Tiretti Bazaar area, which is the old Chinatown, had five- six Chinese schools catering to the population settled there. In fact, Bentinck Street in Kolkata was one such area, which housed Chinese Schools where people living in Tiretti studied. Thus, this was one of the ways the community preserved one of the most important cultural artefact, which is their indigenous language. Also, Chinese being a difficult language to remember due to the vast body of characters it contains, being in constant touch through practice became a major impetus for the formal perpetuation of it through Chinese schools. But to adapt to the current landscape, English, Hindi and in some cases even Bengali were taught at second and third languages in these Chinese schools. Tangra too witnessed a similar progression.

However, with the wave of modernisation sweeping India, where English education and hence knowing the language became symbolic of the change taking place, there was a drastic shift in the medium of education amongst the Chinese as well. Many belonging to middle generation have thus received education in both Chinese and English medium schools. Their initial education till the middle school level has been in Chinese, after which they shifted to English medium schools. The major reason for this shift was the better career and hence economic opportunities that came along with an English education. But the transition mid-way was never smooth. Mr. Henry, who owns the Golden Empire restaurant in Tangra, was initially educated in Chinese but later when he shifted to The Sacred Heart School to get his education in English medium, he initially had problems understanding and comprehending the subjects in a new language, hence he had to start two grades below the one he was currently in. Here Chinese was offered as a second language, which was mainly taken up by the children belonging to the community alone, but the Chinese taught here was not the traditional one.

But today this combination of being educated in two mediums is also hard to find. Members of the community belonging to the younger generation have been exclusively educated in English medium schools. The parents have found this better in terms of the future prospective it would open up for their children. None the less, many still continue to have Chinese as their second language, a unique trace of holding on to whatever part of their cultural heritage they can preserve and in whichever way possible. But an interesting thing which comes up here is the

way it is being taught in these schools. Majority of the schools do not have a Chinese teacher to teach the children. The condition is that it would be offered as a second language only if the members from the community can arrange a teacher on their own, who would take the responsibility of teaching, evaluating and making the framework for the children. Mr. Patrick Lee, a resident of Tangra who owns a tannery in the Bantala leather complex, had to form a group of people from the community to go and request the principal of Don Bosco school to offer Chinese as a second language for their boys, and here too they had to first assure that they would find a teacher themselves.

One such tutor is Master Chin Ting Lang who is 80 years old and has been teaching Chinese language all his life. He comes to take Chinese tuitions for many children studying in these schools who have Chinese as a second language, at the Old Chinese Pei Mei School in Tangra. The school which was once one of the most important and prominent cultural markers for the Chinese living in Tangra, has now been shut for years due to the lack of children pursuing Chinese medium education. Now it functions as a meeting point for community elders in the evenings, exchanging their daily stories and reading the newspaper, apart from the Chinese tuitions and the Children from the community who come to play basketball in the evenings.

The Pei Mei School stands tall, isolated in the middle of the busy landscape of Tangra, which only comes to life in the evenings. Thus, the hustle bustle of a functional school is what it misses today. There were efforts from within the community to revamp and restart the school, and hence an effort to resurrect a dying cultural symbol, but on ground nothing concrete is visible. The project is in fact caught in a legal conflict, where according to the community members the family managing the school has taken over the school forcefully, after overthrowing the principal, with an aim to sell it to real estate barons for commercial purposes. But due to an opposition from the community, which till date considers it as a common cultural property, the process has been put to a halt for now. Another side of the coin is from the perspective of the managing body, as per whom they have been unnecessarily dragged into a legal battle by rivals and this is nothing but an attempt to taint their name and create a hindrance in the revamping of the school. But whichever side one looks at, in the end what has been affected is the revamping of major cultural artifact of the community, and hence the efforts for preserving one's cultural identity has taken a setback.

This is the story of one of the prominent Chinese schools which was somewhere left behind in the process of the rapid changes the community and the landscape are undergoing. However, there have been a very few countable number of schools

who keeping with the changing dynamics have shifted their orientation altogether. One such is the Ling Lang School in Terreti Bazaar area, another being the Grace Ling Lang School in Tangra. Both schools were started by a Chinese couple doing missionary work. The schools were started for the Chinese community and were originally Chinese medium, but with the changing conditions and the English education wave coupled with the declining number of Chinese in Kolkata, the medium shifted to English. Ms. Monica Vincent, Principal of the Ling Lang School explained how with the sharp decline in the Chinese population here, the school now caters to the locals in Kolkata today, especially those coming from the economically and socially weaker sections of the society. The Grace Ling Lang School in Tangra has also shifted to English medium, where they have retained Chinese as a second language, but here too the number of students taking up the language is not significant due to declining Chinese population.

Thus, the state of education amongst the Chinese of Kolkata has been dynamic, responding to the various changes that have taken place.

Language:

With the shift in medium of education to English, the usage of it in everyday conversation and transactions also increased. But this growing popularity of English came at a cost to the Chinese community. Through conversations with the younger generation, one can see that as a consequence of the above change, most of them do not know how to read and write in Mandarin very well. Even with Chinese as second language in school they admitted to the fact that they could hardly read and write and that their knowledge of the language was very basic. Many of them, who having Chinese as second language, have in fact taken it up because of their family's desire and covert pressure, but in reality they find the language very difficult to understand and retain. But here, the reasons behind having children pursue the language cannot be just limited to their efforts to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage, but also practical ones. Mr. Henry, who is a tour guide, settled in Thailand, wants his children to learn Chinese because of good career prospects abroad for those who know the language. Many from the community also agree to the fact that knowing Chinese can improve future career prospects. This comes in the wake of recognising the growing global power and influence of China and the subsequent growth in the increasing importance to know Chinese, to which many pointed out candidly during conversations. However, they at the same time point to the fact that in India there is no scope or added advantage for those who know Chinese, hence another impetus for outward migration abroad. But in all, the threat of a slow disappearance still looms large on the language amongst Chinese living in Kolkata.

Also, the elder generation who have received their education in Mandarin are also not completely in touch with the characters of the language and they have almost forgotten or in some cases beginning to forget how to read and write in Mandarin.

The inability of the people to read and write in Mandarin has also affected the circulation of the Chinese newspaper. The Overseas Chinese Commerce of India is a Chinese newspaper which is printed and circulated amongst the Chinese in Kolkata. The main office is located in Tangra where it is assembled maintained by an old couple from the community, but the printing work is outsourced to a local printing press in the locality itself. Now, of 35 people we had conversations with regarding the newspaper, only 5 read it, all being above the age of 50. Some however also subscribed the newspaper only for elders in the family. The prime reason for not subscribing to the Chinese newspaper amongst the others is that the people do not know the script. Another reason for not subscribing is the preference for English Newspaper or watching news on television. Those who continue to read the newspaper explained that the reason why they subscribe to the Chinese newspaper is to be in touch with the script so that they don't forget it. The newspaper is also important because it has certain sections where they publish important dates regarding Chinese festivals or some information regarding some events particular to community, as well as other local news and global news, which is mainly taken from secondary sources. Thus, the struggle to keep the newspaper in circulation is mainly to preserve the language and the cultural heritage as well as communication within the community, and less about reporting and journalism in a particular language other than English.

Now, the indifference seen amongst a significant number of people within the community towards learning Chinese is also influenced by the fact that they are living in Kolkata where it is much more useful to learn Bengali or Hindi which is used in everyday conversations.

Thus, language being an integral part of a community's culture, any change in it also impacts the other cultural practices of the community.

Culture:

As a cultural artifact, the disappearing indigenous language of the Chinese Community has repercussions on other cultural symbols and practices as well. The Shi Fhu of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple, located in Tangra, explains how the decline in the number of people, especially youngsters knowing the language, has led to the drop in people who can now read the actual religious scriptures in Mandarin. This Buddhist temple in Tangra was built in 1998, which is also

learning cum residential centre for female monks. It follows the teachings of the Bhikuni ordination. What sets it apart is the vision of its founder, Master Hsin Ting, who wanted the teachings of Buddhism to not be restricted to men, and thus established the centre for female monks. The female students are educated about Buddhism in Mandarin, post which they are also funded to pursue higher education in Buddhism in Countries like Taiwan. The centre also has separate Chinese classes for locals and anyone who is interested in the language, depending on the number of students and availability of teachers. Although the course has become popular amongst the people today, due to the growing importance of Chinese, there are times when there are no students to take up the classes. Coming back to the religious practices of this temple cum educational centre, one witnesses an active involvement by a few ardent believers from the Chinese community. There are regular as well as special prayers and ceremonies, especially during full-moon and new moon days every month. It is mostly people from the elder generation of the community who take part in the prayer ceremonies and the community eating that follows. As far as the younger generation is considered, only a few handfuls may take part in religious ceremonies, but the majority is missing from such scenes. This adds on to the indifference they have when it comes to holding on to traditional cultural practices.

Due to the declining number of Chinese living in Kolkata, and the lesser and lesser number of youngsters taking keen interests in perpetuating the religious rituals, a significant number of Buddhist temples belonging to the Chinese community, have now become non- functional. The few temples that are left draw few believers or are used for other purposes. One such temple in Tangra is located in a two-storey building, where the temple occupies the ground floor with idols of god of mercy, god of wealth and god of war. Here the concept of traditional Chinese yin-yang is prominent here. The upper floor of this building functions as tuition centre for children of locals and internal migrants who have now occupied Tangra. The building originally belongs to Chinese lady who now lives in Canada, and has rented the space for the above.

But it is not just the Buddhist temples that are maintained by the minority of Chinese Indians left behind. Tangra also houses the famous 'Chinese Kali Temple' which is the epitome of intermingling and adaptation of the culture of Kolkata amongst the Chinese. The temple is maintained and run by the Chinese in Tangra, who also have appointed a Hindu priest to take care of the ritual proceedings. Assimilation and adaptation of the local cultural practices is also made visible by the fact that many of the Chinese Indians today, along with practicing Buddhism, also practice Christianity.

Nevertheless purely indigenous religious and cultural practices are also maintained by the community simultaneously. The Cantonese of Tiretti Bazaar belong to various clubs, which derive their roots from the various districts in China from where the people migrated. Each club has their own church and deity who the members of only that club worship. The Clubs in Terreti are Nam sung, Sei Vei, Sei Ip, Majong. The deities here are thus the indigenous figures of the regions from where they were brought. Mr. Li, who is the head of the Sei Vei Club tells us how the deity in their temple is the original one brought from China, and so are the different inscriptions and scripture in the temple. These clubs interestingly also have a more special social dimension, which are the weekly gatherings on Sundays where men relax, converse and enjoy themselves. Women however were never seen to be part of these gatherings.

Holding on to their cultural symbols has also meant that many of the Chinese beliefs and superstitions are also maintained in their day to day life. The belief in colour red being symbolic for good luck is visible by the preference for painting the doors of their restaurants, tanneries and houses with this colour. One can also see traditional red banners hanging outside these very places belonging to the community. This actually makes their spaces stand out among the other buildings in the surroundings, thus giving them a distinct identity. The belief in number '8' bringing luck whereas number '4' being unlucky is visible in their frequent usage of the former in their vehicle numbers, outside homes, and the avoidance of the later altogether. It is also believed that the flower head fish brings prosperity hence it is found in aquariums at many restaurants. Most of these practices have also been adopted by the locals in Kolkata, which points towards cultural assimilation taking place the other way as well.

Cultural assimilation is also visible in the manner in which festivals are celebrated in Kolkata. For the Chinese the most important festival is the Chinese New Year, which is celebrated each year with great enthusiasm and grandeur. It is also the time when the Chinese settled abroad come to visit their friends and families. One of the most popular events that takes place during the new year celebration is the Dragon dance. Over the last few years the participation of the locals in the Chinese New Year celebration has increased. Many come out in the streets to watch the dragon procession. Chinese woman who were not active participants have also started taking interest in the festivities. Kali Puja which is one of the most important festivals for the Bengalis is celebrated by the Chinese as well to which they contribute financially as well. Many prominent members of the community also fund Pandals in various parts of Kolkata.

Adjusting to the changing conditions has also made intermarriages outside the community a much more acceptable norm within the community. Earlier most of the marriages took place within the community, where even intermarriages between a Hakka and a Cantonese were rare. Rejections even if it does today, mainly comes from the oldest generation, however even this has changed significantly. But even when it comes to intermarriage today, as interesting pattern is visible in terms of the communities into which the Chinese marry. Most of these are people from north-east India, Nepal, Thailand or other south-east Asian countries, thus, marking a clear racial similarity. However, some Chinese have also married people from other Indian Communities such as Bengalis, Punjabis and Tamilians amongst others. Speaking of Intermarriage, Mrs. Maria, an Anglo Indian lady, mentioned how many Chinese settled in Bow Barrack area, where formerly only Anglo Indians lived, after intermarriage became popular. Mr Li who owns the Sei Vei restaurant in Terreti Bazaar area, married a Gorka lady. The Head chef of the same restaurant has married a Bengali woman. However, he is the only one from his family marrying outside the community. Mr. Henry of Namking restaurant married a Thai woman when he went to work in the country. Many of the marriage rituals have undergone changes, adapting new customs. Thus, other than traditional Chinese marriage rituals like the communal tea serving ceremony amongst relatives, feeding of boiled eggs between the couple symbolic of their union, many Christian weddings practices also take place. Thus, for many of the people who follow Buddhism as well as Christianity, there are usually two kinds of weddings, a Church wedding and a traditional Chinese wedding ceremony.

Identity:

The changes taking place in language, religion and other cultural artifacts coupled with changes taking place in economic and political domains affect an individual's identity. The question of identity for a minority diaspora brings in a lot of concerns and emotions. The questions regarding 'home', belonging, citizenship or nationality are very sensitive. For any diasporic community the feeling of belonging is affected by the political and economic situation of the host country. The constant and rigid affirmation that they are Indians reflects the anxieties and vulnerabilities of the Chinese community. Since the memories of 1962 are still etched in the minds of the people and therefore any disturbance in India- China relationship makes them insecure. The ambiguity of their status was made clear when Mr. Daniel said there have been discussions amongst them that in case a war broke out between India and China they would all just pack their bags and leave. Mr. Jacob, who owns a sauce factory in Terreti, fears that in case India- China relationship takes an adverse turn the anti-social elements might take advantage and tries to turn people against them and cause them harm. Not just the troubled Indo-China

relationship is the cause of their insecurity but the increasing Hindu majoritarian nationalism and intolerance adds on to their woes.

The community has also been facing subtle racial discrimination over the years. Calling out names, passing comments on the Chinese here are not something people are surprised of. This shows the intensity to which this has been normalised in the minds of people today. Many say that this is much more outside the Chinatown, as people are more familiarised with the Chinese living with them, as compared to other parts of Kolkata. However, Pinky, a young woman living in Tangra, has experienced comments and racial slurs passed on within Chinatown as well. Monica, another resident of Tangra, shared her experience of being called 'Chinki' when she was walking with her mother outside her house.

The 'othering' of the Chinese community is made evident during conversations with people living outside Chinatown. In the minds of many, the Chinese Indians are still outsiders who do not belong to India. There are a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes associated with the Chinese such as all Chinese take opium, they are conservative and do not marry outside, they are all non-vegetarians who eat pork and beef and that all Chinese restaurants sell pork and beef. In fact, we were advised by many people not to go into the streets of Chinatown, Tangra post seven as the people there are very unruly. However, our experience does not confirm the notions that people have about Chinatown. The place was safe and we did not face trouble from the Chinese or the migrant workers living there. Similarly the notion that Chinese are conservative when it comes to marriage gets dismissed if one were to look at the intermarriages that have taken place in the community. The notion that all restaurants sell pork and beef is false as we visited many restaurants where they did not sell pork or beef to accommodate different sections of Indian society.

Not just in the streets but the Chinese community have faced discrimination and felt neglected in government offices as well. Mr. Stephen, an entrepreneur living in Terreti, shared his experience of being ignored in government offices. He remembers several incidents where he was kept waiting for many hours to get simple paper work done and how other people who came after him got the work done before him. He also mentioned how he has noticed a change in people's expression when they came to know that he is a Chinese Indian. Many other people from the community have mentioned that their Chinese Indian identity is the reason why they don't apply for government jobs. They think that their applications will get rejected or they would not be selected because of their identity. Such experiences have added to their anxieties and vulnerability, even more so today, since only a minority of them is left in Kolkata.

Although the Chinese in Kolkata are trying to preserve their unique Chinese identity, they have assimilated several elements from Indian culture as well. The embedding of localized beliefs into the mainstream culture creates a hybrid and unique identity. The yearly Pilgrimage made to the tomb of Achew is a marker of maintaining a distinct ethnic identity. However the Kali worship which goes hand in hand with practicing Buddhism and/or Christianity is a sign of acculturation.

In the case of Chinese, the high rate of migration can also be attributed to not just the desire for better economic prospects or aspiration for a better lifestyle but also to their identity. In spite of their attachment to Kolkata and affirmation of an Indian identity, the feeling that they are outsiders has been voiced out by many. As more and more people are migrating, the people who are left behind from the community face pressure of vacating their houses from the builders and other real estate agents who want their property to build high-rise apartment building. Mrs. Agnes, who has been living in Tangra for almost sixty years now complained about the pressure she, is facing from builders to vacate her land. This kind of a pressure is also being faced by other members of the community. She also mentioned how murders have taken place in the area because of property issues and how the vulnerable old members of the community who are left behind become easy targets. They also feel helpless as there is no major support and action taken by the local authorities, who they consider to be hand in gloves with the powerful stakeholders involved in the business.

While the major impetus for the Chinese community to migrate abroad is better economic prospects, the fact that the current socio-political scenarios adds on to the restlessness and desire to migrate cannot be denied. Their volatile identity, which is constantly brought to question also, adds on to their vulnerability and under such circumstances migrating abroad is the only practical and feasible option before them.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Chinese of Kolkata, since their migration to India have interacted and adapted to the changes that have impacted them economically, politically, culturally and socially. While some of the changes have been welcomed by the community, others have been resented. These changes have led to the drastic increase in their migration, which has left the Chinese of Kolkata struggling to sustain their community. However, it also needs to be understood that the process of migration itself is increasing the pace at which these very changes are taking place in domains like education, language, marriage patterns, occupation and other cultural artifacts of the community. This entire process of change that the community is struggling with has affected how the community perceives itself and

thus its identity. Added to this, any tension or border issues between India-China, makes them anxious about their future here, which adds on to the vulnerabilities of a small minority community living an ever changing life.

At present the Chinese who are left behind are trying to adapt themselves to the needs of the global market while clinging on to their traditions and trying to preserve their tangible and intangible heritage. It is unfortunate how very little initiative is taken by the government or other Non- Government organisations to help the community. Initiatives like the CHA project which was aimed at helping the community to restore and preserve their culture has been declared a failure by the community itself as the members have not even heard of such a project. Thus, there is sense of helplessness as well as resentment when it comes to such initiatives and the any work being done by the authorities.

Hence, looking at the rate and intensity of migration taking place today, it is doubtful if there will be a Chinatown in Kolkata twenty years down the lane. Will this soul of Kolkata be able to survive and sustain is a question to which only time can provide the answer.

REFERENCES

1. Sircar, Jawhar. 1990. 'The Chinese of Kolkata.' In *Calcutta: The Living City Vol. II*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, 64-68. New Delhi : Oxford University Press.
2. Xing, Zhang. 2009. 'The Bowbazar Chinatown.' *India International Centre Quarterly* 36(3/4): 396-413. Accessed on 6-4-2017.

