

## Identity Creation and Ideas of Belonging in Kolkata's Chinese-Indian Community

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### Abstract

*The arrival of migrants from China and their subsequent settlement in Kolkata has shaped the complex tapestry of Kolkata's culture in significant ways. More formal, State-ascribed means of identification of the migrants from China to Kolkata, India, do not lend sufficient credence to the 'Chinese-Indian' hybrid identity (which is based on the community's cultural experiences) that draws from both the Chinese and the Indian pasts. This paper traces the history of migration and the complexities of identity creation in the Chinese (minority) community of Kolkata who began arriving in the city in the latter half of the 18th century. Further, the paper examines the hybrid nature of the Chinese-Indian identity. It explores how this dual identity of being at once Chinese and Indian emerged gradually and can be traced through the various cultural practices of the community. Following this, the paper attempts to foreground how Kolkata's Chinese community created a hyphenated Chinese-Indian identity for themselves in the city. Citizenship and various other legal documents help place this community within a larger national, legal framework, but these documents only attempt to create an Indian identity. For a community that still identifies strongly with its Chinese roots, I contend that these State-ascribed legal documents do not capture the hybrid nature of Chinese-Indian identity in its true essence. While contending, I also try to unpack how Chinese-Indian is an identity in flux and cannot be reduced to a either a wholly Chinese or fully Indian.*

**Keywords:** Overseas Chinese, Hybrid Identity, Sojourner, Diasporic Consciousness.

## Introduction

Chinese migration to India can be located against the larger backdrop of the Chinese diaspora that was underway in many parts of South and Southeast Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, this paper will examine Chinese migration to India in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup>



*A Chinese temple near Budge-Budge, Kolkata, where the first Chinese to India, arrived. The date on top is most probably the year it was built- 1718. (Photograph by Joita Das)*

centuries as a phenomenon with distinctive features, separating it from the diasporic movement of the Chinese to other parts of the world. Whereas there is considerable scholarship on the Chinese diaspora to other parts of Asia, scholarship on Chinese migration to India is particularly scarce, owing to the significantly smaller numbers of Chinese people who migrated to India compared to

other parts of East and Southeast Asia. Ellen Oxfeld and Jennifer Liang have contributed significantly to the scholarship on the Chinese community of India. Whereas Oxfeld traces the community's economic history in *Blood, Sweat and Mahjong*, Liang has looked more broadly at the kinds of jobs the overseas Chinese took up when they migrated to India in *Migration Patterns and Occupational Specializations of Kolkata Chinese*. Nevertheless, questions regarding the community's identity

and their sense of belonging to Kolkata (earlier Calcutta), the capital of West Bengal and former capital of colonial India, have not been directly addressed in previous works. It is also important to note here that the term 'Chinese-Indian' has never been figured historically in any official state document, but it is one that the immigrant community in Kolkata has owned and used over time in identifying themselves. Thus, the hyphenated label of the Chinese-Indian is an expression created and owned by the community and is not a nominalization limited to this research. In such a context, this paper looks closely at notions of identity and belonging within the community. It complicates the idea of a 'Chinese-Indian' identity by arguing that this unique hybrid identity of being at once 'Chinese' and 'Indian' is not brought about by a national decree, or a State mandated policy like the granting of citizenship, but rather through more organic and informal practises of the community in Kolkata. Whereas citizenship of a host country could foster feelings of belonging and allow immigrant communities to lay claim to a larger national identity, such means of identification have not been influential in creating the hybrid identity that, I argue, was central to the diasporic consciousness of this community. The terms 'Indian' and 'Chinese' do not in themselves capture the essence of being 'Chinese-Indian.' Therefore, this paper tries to trace the origin of the term 'Chinese-Indian' as a more profound and dynamic response of the immigrant community to its presence in the host country through a long and protracted process of isolation and assimilation with the host country's culture. This paper critically examines identity creation and notions of belonging among Kolkata's Chinese-Indians and examines how this community created a hyphenated identity for themselves in the city.

This research combines secondary reading with ethnographic field study. It includes a visit to Kolkata's Chinatown in the

Tangra region, in the eastern part of the city and semi-structured interviews with notable members of the Chinese-Indian Association - a group of volunteers from within the Chinese community of Kolkata committed to protecting and promoting the culture and welfare of the Chinese-Indian community in the city<sup>1</sup>. The paper attempts to situate this ethnographical work within broader theoretical frameworks of Migration and Culture Studies.

### **Histories of Migration**

This section introduces and explains the identities of early Chinese migrants to India. Chinese migration to India occurred in three phases (Liang 2007:397). The first wave occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. In this phase, those who came to India were predominantly traders and skilled workers who frequently traversed the maritime routes between India and China (397). The second wave of Chinese migration occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century following political turmoil in the Chinese mainland. Migrants who arrived in India in this phase were primarily men who were political refugees. They were mostly unskilled workers. The third and final phase of Chinese migration to India occurred after World War 2 (397). The migrants in this phase, too, had fled political conflict in the Chinese mainland.

The first wave comprised of Chinese migrants who came to India in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries via well-established trade routes along the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the first Chinese migrants to India were traders (397). They were also mostly men who were either unmarried

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<sup>1</sup> These were personal interviews conducted with four members of the Chinese-Indian Association, in Kolkata, West Bengal. All interviews were conducted between June 2015 and June 2018. These were semi-structured interviews. To protect my interviewees' privacy, I will not disclose their real names in my paper.

or who had left their families behind in China to come work in Kolkata, which they imagined, in the words of the former President of the Chinese-Indian Association, to be a city “paved in gold.” The Chinese viewed India as a prosperous country where they could travel to obtain lucrative jobs (398). The former President of the Chinese-Indian Association emphasized, moreover, that the rising importance of Kolkata in British India as a commercial entry point meant that the city represented wealth and prosperity in the popular imagination of Chinese migrants preparing to undertake maritime expeditions to Kolkata in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

However, the former President also stated that for most Chinese sea-farers of that time, the aim was to travel to India, earn money and return with their savings to their families in China. Early Chinese migrants to Kolkata never planned to settle down in the city. The first Chinese migrants to Bengal showcased, therefore, a strong sojourner mentality. This sojourner mentality was not a feature of Chinese migration to India alone. Sunil Amrith, in *Migration and Diaspora in South Asia*, writes that a certain sojourner mentality characterized the migratory patterns and movements of many Asian communities until the mid-twentieth century (Amrith 2011:4), although it may have been especially characteristic of Chinese immigrant communities. Migrant workers planned to reside in their host countries only temporarily, intending to eventually return to China. Amrith notes that migrants continued to maintain close contact with their home country even as they sought jobs and residence in other countries (4). The former President of the Chinese-Indian Association's remarks brought home this fact of Chinese migration to Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, where sojourner Chinese came to India primarily as fortune-seekers seeking wealth to take back to China but never planning to marry into or settle down amongst the Indians. However, later Chinese migrants to Kolkata found

it increasingly difficult to return to China due to the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent Communist Revolution that made travel between China and India difficult in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was in 1946 that many Chinese migrants decided to settle down in India, permanently, some even attempting to bring their families from China to India during this time. The President of the Chinese-Indian Association also pointed out that once the Chinese began to settle down in Bengal, some of them even ended up marrying local women from Northeast India. Local women from the Northeast, like the Chinese, had Mongoloid features (Liang 2007:403). The former President added that women from the Northeast were readily accepted into the Chinese-Indian community since their racial features resembled those of their Chinese partners. The first notable Chinese migrant to have come and settled down in India was a tea-trader named Tong Atchew (Xing 2009:56). Atchew arrived in Kolkata in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. He landed in Budge Budge, a village and riverine port just south of Kolkata. Most sources trace his arrival in the city to 1778 (Xing and Sen 2013:206). Atchew was among the first notable Chinese traders to have travelled to Kolkata in pursuit of a better life. There is an almost saint-like aura around the figure of Tong Atchew today, transforming him into a quasi-mythological figurehead. He lies buried in Atchipur (named after him), close to Budge Budge. Atchew's tomb is a pilgrimage site for Chinese-Indians today (214) who continue to pay ritual homage to him during the Lunar New Year.

The deification of historical figures is common in Confucianism. The immortalizing of Atchew in the Chinese-Indian consciousness is part of this legacy. The first month of the Lunar New Year is devoted to worshipping ancestors. In the Confucianist belief system, ancestors have significant control over the lives of the living (Xing 2009:56). Therefore, appeasement of the ancestral spirits through ritual worship is

essential at this time. Chinese-Indians regard Atchew as an awe-inspiring 'founding father' of their community (57). Atchew has become this community's collective common ancestor. He also epitomizes the prosperity achievable in a foreign land through hard work and perseverance. Therefore, Atchew's deification may be held to be a confirmation of a certain cultural continuity of the Chinese-Indians' culture, with China. Aspects of Chinese-Indian culture continue to draw from the Confucianist culture of this community's ancestral land. Asian immigrant communities are known to have continued to maintain cultural and political links with their countries of origin (Amrith 2011:2). The veneration of Atchew during the Chinese New Year, therefore, is a celebration by the Chinese-Indian people of their origin and subsequent migration to India.

The Chinese-Indians' links with mainland China and Taiwan continued in other ways, as well. Another interviewee from the Chinese-Indian Association claimed that the Pei Mei School in Tangra, set up by the Chinese-Indian community, was once supported by the Nationalist Government in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government subsidized schools for the Chinese-Indians in Kolkata (Ma and D'Souza 2020:83). My interviewee also stated that the Taiwanese Government would offer scholarships to Chinese-Indians for higher studies in Taiwan, as well. Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party was also involved in wooing the overseas Chinese community and attempted to evacuate them by ships in a dramatic move during the 1962 China-India War when many from this community were interned forcefully at Deoli, a village in the western desert state of Rajasthan (16).

All of this suggests that the Chinese governments, both Communist and Nationalist, continued to exercise political control over the overseas Chinese community in India.

Cultural and political links were not wholly severed even when migration between China and India slowed down in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This investment in the overseas Chinese communities was also in part to encourage remittances to mainland China and Taiwan, where both governments saw Chinese immigrant communities as potential sources of finance for their economies. Hence, both, the Kuomintang and the People's Republic of China looked to the overseas Chinese for support. However, this is not to suggest that the Chinese immigrant community's culture remained static or too firmly rooted in their country of origin through the period of their migration.

As this paper explores, the community, in its later stages, entered into a period of trial and integration, finally consolidating a hybrid identity for itself. This hybridization opened up the space through which the Chinese-Indian community could assert its identity and sense of belonging to Kolkata by drawing on both the Chinese and Indian cultures at the same time.



*Chinese Tannery in (left), Gate of a Chinese tannery (middle) and leather tanning in Tangra (right) (Photographs by Joita Das)*

### **The Hubeinese<sup>2</sup>, Cantonese<sup>3</sup> and Hakka<sup>4</sup> Chinese**

The Chinese-Indians in Kolkata today identify themselves as belonging to one of three major subgroups: Hakka, Cantonese or Hubeinese. Historically, the Hubeinese specialized in dentistry work. People from Hubei were adept ‘teeth setters’ who were traditionally itinerant. They would travel around Hubei fixing and cleaning people’s teeth (Liang 2007:407). When the Hubeinese came to India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they set up their dentistry practises in India and catered to both, the local Indian population and other Chinese in the city. During the community’s peak years in the mid-1900s, there were over 300 Chinese-owned dentistry businesses in Kolkata. However, after Indian independence, the Congress-led Indian government passed laws that mandated all doctors, dentists and clinics in the country to undergo scrutiny by the Health Department and receive proper accreditation. This was a significant setback for the Hubeinese community. Many did not have proper medical degrees since ‘teeth-setting,’ was a form of indigenous healthcare practice which could be carried out without formal qualifications (Biswas 2017:50).

Next, the Cantonese were among the earliest immigrants to India (Liang 2007:404). They were sea-farers and adept in shipbuilding and carpentry. They took up jobs as dockworkers in Kolkata. At first, the Cantonese only engaged in small carpentry work. Over the years as they picked up English and Hindi, they expanded their clientele, secured jobs with major companies and began specializing in interior woodwork. By the 1950s, about 20 independent Chinese carpentry businesses

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<sup>2</sup> The Hubeinese Chinese came from central China.

<sup>3</sup> The Cantonese Chinese came from provinces in southern China.

<sup>4</sup> The Hakka Chinese were a language community. They also came from southern China.

had been set up in the city (Biswas 2017:49). However, very few Chinese carpentry businesses exist in Kolkata today.

The majority of Chinese-Indians in Kolkata are Hakka Chinese. The Hakka came from South-eastern China, from the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Jiangxi (Oxfeld 1993:1). Upon arrival in the country, the Hakka took to the shoe-making and leather tanning businesses. They were mostly unskilled migrant workers and did not possess any skill in tanning or shoe-making but acquired these skills once they arrived in India and set up businesses here (Biswas 2017:50). At one point, there were over a hundred shoe shops owned by Hakka Chinese in central Kolkata, in the *Bowbazaar* area, where the city's first Chinatown emerged (50). Today, many shoe shops in *Bowbazaar* still retain their old Chinese names, but they have been turned over to Indian owners. The Chinese shoe businesses took a huge hit when local manufacturers like *Bata* and *Khadim* emerged as major players in the shoe market (50). Many abandoned shoe manufacturing and went into tanning leather in the Tangra region, in the eastern periphery of Kolkata. Increased Chinese activity in the area led to the emergence of a second Chinatown in Tangra by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One interviewee explained how the Korean War came as a boon to the tannery owners. With the demand for boots for soldiers steadily outstripping supply, the Chinese of Kolkata were approached. What followed was a windfall for many families in the business. The Chinese almost completely monopolized leather tanning in Kolkata. The leather manufacturing business was considered a polluting profession by high-caste Hindus (Oxfeld 1993:3). Because of such caste-based prejudices that prevented the majority Hindu population of Kolkata from working with raw cowhide in the leather industry, the Chinese found it easy to invest in the tanning business and turn it into a profitable enterprise in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Chinatowns and the Notion of ‘Othering’**

Ellen Oxfeld (1993), while tracing the economic history of the Chinese-Indians of Kolkata, argues that the Chinese-Indians were a prime example of what Max Weber in the 1920s called ‘pariah capitalists.’ Pariah capitalists were characterized by their high degree of economic success coupled with their relatively low social status and lack of political power (12). The term itself was coined to refer to the economic activities of those communities who were not natives of the region in which they had set up successful economic practices. In theory, at least, should pariah capitalists ever threaten the economic workings of the larger host country, they could easily be deported (13). Therefore despite their strong economic power, pariah capitalists remained outsiders in the host countries in which they operated. The Chinese-Indians’ strong business ethics and surprising commercial success given their relatively low political power defined their status as pariah capitalists. It should also be emphasized that even during the Chinese-Indian community’s prime in the mid-1900s, and despite their flourishing carpentry, tanning and dentistry practises, they were essentially a pariah community, marginalized by the majority Hindu Bengali population of Kolkata. The former President of the Chinese-Indian Association stated that harassment on the streets and name-calling (such as *chinky*, a derogatory racial slur to refer to people who have East Asian features) were common. Chinese-Indians were subjected to continuous racial othering which again confirmed the community’s pariah relationship with the majority ethnic population of Kolkata and their lack of political power even within a city where they had a noticeable entrepreneurial presence. Racial profiling of the Chinese was a common

phenomenon in Indian films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well.<sup>5</sup> The continuous criminalizing of Chinese characters in films post the 1962 China-India war had unfortunate implications for how the Chinese-Indian community came to be viewed in Kolkata, contributing to their progressive and systematic othering in the city. Although the community had dealings with Bengali businessmen, Kolkata's Chinatowns operated almost like ethnic ghettos - exclusive spaces for the middle-class Bengali's 'Other.' By operating their tanning businesses only from Tangra, the Hakka remained segregated from the city's majority Hindu Bengali population (Xing and Sen 2013:209). The ethnic ghettoization of the Chinese community explains how the Chinese-Indians were able to maintain their 'Chineseness,' in the face of rapid urbanization and expansion of Kolkata in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of Chinatowns is ubiquitous and not restricted to the Chinese experience in India, as they are to be found wherever the Chinese have migrated. However, what makes Chinatowns in Kolkata unique is the social ostracism directed against the profession of tanning and the consequent spatial and cultural segregation of the Chinese-Indians from the majority Hindu Bengali population of the city. In this culture of enclaves (Amrith 2011:11), the Chinese-Indian community's image of themselves as distinctly Chinese was able to gain strength. Chinatowns enabled the community to retain its linguistic and cultural distinctiveness in a foreign city.

Clan networks played a dominant role as well in establishing kinship relationships among the Chinese community in

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<sup>5</sup> See: Kripalini, Coonoor. "Reading China in popular Hindi film- three points in time: 1946, 1964 and 2009." *Asian Cinema*, vol 23, no. 2, 2012, pp. 217-229 and Uberoi, Patricia. "China in Bollywood." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 45, issue 3, 2011, pp. 315-342.

Kolkata. In his interview, the former President of the Chinese-Indian Association noted that in Chinese culture, clan affiliations were vital. Clan members had an obligation to support other clan members. Therefore, such clan networks guaranteed assistance and help to any Chinese immigrant in Kolkata. In the second wave of Chinese migration to India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was primarily an unplanned migration, many migrants did not have any contacts in India.

They were dependent wholly on the goodwill and generosity of other Chinese members in the city for their survival in Kolkata (Liang 07:402). Strong clan associations, or *huiguans*, already existed in the subcontinent since the time of the first Chinese settlers. *Huiguans* were “associations of persons of common geographic background” (Xing 2009:56). In foreign countries, *huiguans* offered places for lodging, organized cultural and religious festivals and even doubled up as mediating bodies to settle disputes among community members (56). It was primarily because of these *huiguans* –quasi-legal, regulatory bodies - that so many Chinese migrants coming to India could secure livelihoods for themselves. Participation in *huiguans* was also vital in forging some form of a diasporic consciousness where immigrant communities were able to maintain their links to their homeland in a foreign land (Amrith 2011:79). The continued importance of clan identities emphasized the Chinese-Indian community’s strong commitment to their Chinese roots and how it never completely dissipated even when the community finally settled down in Kolkata.

### **The Chinese Kali Temple: Assimilating into an ‘Indian’ Identity**

This section looks at a site in Tangra not far from the tanneries where a temple is dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Kali. This temple is popularly known as the Chinese Kali *Mandir*

(temple), and I argue that this site is pivotal in shaping the Chinese-Indian community's sense of belonging to Kolkata. Its centrality in establishing this community's unique hybrid identity needs to be elaborated.



*The Chinese-Kali Mandir in Tangra, Kolkata (Photography by Joita Das)*

In the Hindu religion, Kali is the Goddess of time and death. The religious mythology of Kali associates her not only with violence and death but also with sexuality and motherly love (Doniger). She is most commonly characterized as a black deity with a red tongue (Doniger). But what could have prompted this Hindu deity's inclusion in the religious consciousness of the Chinese-Indians of Kolkata?

Anecdotal evidence of Kali's miraculous healing powers are many. One of them is that seventy years ago, there were just a couple of "*sindoor* (vermillion) smeared black stones under an old tree" at the site where the temple now stands (Pandey 2009). The place was mostly frequented by Hindu Bengalis who worshipped at these rocks. The Chinese followed suit believing that praying there would bring them good luck and fortune. Another legend claims that a ten-year-old Chinese-Indian boy from Tangra had contracted a fatal illness. When his parents had lost all hope of the boy recovering, they went to the Kali temple site, near the *sindoor* smeared rocks, and

prayed for their child to get better. Miraculously, the boy was cured (Pandey 2009).

Belief in such myths and legends surrounding the deity and her miraculous powers helped draw the Chinese-Indians to the host community of Hindu Bengalis to the extent that the temple came to symbolize a union of Chinese and Indian religious sentiments (Pandey 2009). Although a Hindu Brahmin priest conducts the Kali *puja* (worship), the Chinese have found ways to incorporate some of their own worshipping practices into the Hindu ceremony such as the lighting of special Chinese incense sticks (joss sticks) or the burning of paper to ward off evil spirits in the temple. These are both quintessential Chinese religious practises (Pandey 2009). Finally, instead of the usual sweets served at temples as *prasad* (edible offerings), in this Kali temple, the priest offers devotees chop suey and noodles - a staple in Chinese cuisine - as a religious offering (Pandey 2009).

The appropriation of the Hindu goddess Kali symbolizes a nascent stage of cultural syncretism. The particular modes of Kali worship among Chinese-Indians indicate that Kali has had a unique presence in the Chinese-Indian community's image of themselves in the city, even though Kali does not arouse the same emotions in the Chinese-Indians as they do in devout Hindus. She is not the distant guardian of death and time. On the contrary, she is a healer who can also bestow good fortune upon those who pray at her alter. The appropriation of the fearful Kali by the Chinese leads one to wonder if the Chinese-Indian community's own desire for wealth and good health had not found a natural resting place in the Hindu divinity. The Chinese-Indians may have projected onto Kali their socio-economic aspirations, fears and apprehensions in a foreign land and in the process appropriated her from the pantheon of Hindu deities. Therefore, it may be surmised that Kali was a

'wish-fulfilling' deity in the Chinese popular imagination (Xing 2009:61). Furthermore, Kali in Bengal is a mother goddess with an almost ubiquitous presence in the city. Her popular image may have hastened her acceptance by the Chinese who could adapt to her worship and give her a place in their imagination of the sacred. The interesting mix of Hindu customs with quintessential Chinese rituals showcases a unique Chinese-Indian identity, a living metaphor of the Chinese community's sense of belonging to and integration with Kolkata. The worship of *Kali* helped the Chinese community of Kolkata forge a bond with the mainstream Hindu Bengalis while simultaneously separating and distinguishing them from the latter.

However, it is essential to note that Chinese-Indians who visit this temple do not practice any form of Hinduism. Some Chinese-Indians who visit this site are Christians (Pandey 2009). Most are Buddhists (Pandey 2009). Therefore, the Chinese Kali temple in no way indicates the 'Hinduization' of the Chinese-Indian community of Kolkata. Rather, the Chinese Kali temple grants this community unique ownership of a particular sacred space within Chinatown at a special moment of the community's crafting of an 'Indian' identity for itself. The construction of worshipping sites was a way through which diasporic communities made a "symbolic claim of belonging" (Amrith 2011:83) in their host countries' lands and the Chinese Kali temple could well be illustrative of this.

Finally, the former President of the Chinese-Indian Association maintained that he was a Daoist Christian. As is widely understood and received, Daoism is not a religious category but a 'way of life,' complementing Christian and Buddhist doctrines. Educated Chinese-Indians, in identifying themselves as Daoists first and Christians or Buddhists only next, have used doctrinal Daoism to unify and forge the Chinese-Indians

together while simultaneously underscoring the ‘Chineseness,’ that remained constitutive of their Chinese-Indian identity. The worship of Kali and the reverence shown to Dao are interestingly two parallel undercurrents in the process of identity creation among Chinese-Indians and showcases their hybrid identity.

### **Politics of the Hyphen: Consolidating a ‘Chinese-Indian’ Identity**

This section takes a closer look at the hybrid nature of the Chinese-Indian identity from the perspective of the host country’s politics. Identity is the sense of recognition that a person experiences “of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group” (Hall 1996:2). Often, identities are consolidated and maintained through systematic exclusion. Finally, identities are always in the process of ‘becoming’ rather than merely ‘being’ (4). The Chinese-Indian identity, similarly, is an identity in flux.

### **The 1962 China-India War**

The Chinese-Indians have had a painful history in Kolkata. During the community’s prime, about fifty thousand Chinese resided in Kolkata (Xing 2009:205), but their numbers have dwindled significantly in recent years, bringing it down to a couple of thousand that remain in the entire Indian subcontinent today (205). The 1962 China-India War marked a climactic moment in the community’s history and is perhaps the primary cause of so many Chinese-Indians leaving Kolkata in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Biswas 2017:49). This War saw the Indian government detain, intern and even deport Chinese-Indians on the mere suspicion of affiliation to Communist China (53). In *The Deoliwallahs*, Joy Ma and Dilip D’Souza note how over three thousand Chinese-Indians who lived in and around Kolkata and who had for many generations until then called India their home were rounded up, put on

trains and transported thousands of kilometres across the country to internment camps in Deoli during the War. Fear of persecution and years of discrimination led many Chinese to seek opportunities outside India post the 1962 China-India War (Liang 2007:405). Although the War remains a watershed event in the community's history, the effects of the war on the collective psyche and demography of Chinese-Indians are beyond the scope of this particular paper, which instead looks at the community's history and its subsequent cultural assimilation through the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Surprisingly, this community's persecution and internment in 1962 was almost a forgotten fact of history and only recently returned to the limelight (Griffiths 2013). Growing tensions between India and China in 2020 and ongoing protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 foregrounded once again questions regarding citizenship and minority identities in the country. It is partly in this light that more studies need to be carried out on South Asia's ethnic minority communities, whose complicated histories of migration and stories of assimilation into the larger Indian nation-state are often neglected fields of research within Indian History.

The 1962 China-India War, however, did highlight the hybridity of the Chinese-Indian identity. The outcome of the War has been quite evident. There has been large-scale emigration of Chinese-Indians out of India in the latter half of the twentieth century following the War. If a nation-state was perceived to be the homeland for a particular majority ethnic community (Amrith 2011:118), then the persecution of the Chinese-Indians during the War reinforced this dominant ideology of that time. Although the existence of ethnic minority communities in many parts of Asia challenged this idea (117), the Chinese-Indians remained a rather politically weak minority in India. Consequently, they became the victims

of state-sponsored persecution in 1962 when questions of Indian citizenship were increasingly being defined along ethnolinguistic lines. Many who were persecuted during the 1962 China-India War had opted for Indian Citizenship under the Indian constitution. They were legally Indian citizens. But in 1962, racial and linguistic differences served to distance this community from India's majority ethnic population even when Chinese migration to India had slowed down considerably and much of the community had learnt to adapt to mainstream middle-class Bengali society.

### **Towards an Upwardly Mobile Identity**

In my conversations with representatives of the Chinese-Indian Association, I could perceive that a generational drift was taking place in the way the Chinese community made sense of themselves in Kolkata. Older generation Chinese-Indians could speak Hakka Chinese, whereas the younger generation seemed to have been more fully assimilated into urban, middle-class Bengali culture. Two of my interviewees who identified as belonging to the younger generation of Chinese-Indians in Kolkata spoke more English than Chinese and had migrated out of Kolkata's Chinatowns and lived in the relatively more affluent and cosmopolitan Salt Lake and Park Street areas. The younger generation Chinese-Indians had taken up a variety of jobs in Kolkata and were no longer bound by the occupational specializations of their forefathers who had migrated to Kolkata from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. All this is illustrative of an identity that is in flux. The hyphenated identity of a Chinese-Indian is rapidly eroding only to be replaced by a more aggressive, cosmopolitan, and upwardly mobile 'Indian' identity. Nevertheless, even with increased assimilation into the majority's culture, the hybrid nature of the Chinese-Indian identity will remain intact in so far as the community's everyday cultural practices continue to be informed by its

histories of migration. These practices include annual pilgrimages to Atchew's grave, the celebration of Chinese New Year on the streets of Kolkata's Chinatowns or the worship of Kali in Tangra.

Hybridity is characteristic of immigrant communities worldwide. Homi K. Bhabha in *Cultures in Between* has expanded on the idea that immigrant subjectivities and diasporic identities always draw from both, the immigrant community's host and its home cultures. Bhabha quotes T.S. Eliot when he writes:

“...The people [immigrants] have taken with them a part of the total culture... The culture which develops in the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated...by whatever relations are established with some native [the host country's local] race...” (Bhabha 1996:54).

Although writing in the context of colonial settler colonies and third world migration, Bhabha and his reference to Eliot sum up the argument presented in this paper. What lies at the heart of the 'Chinese-Indian' identity is also an amalgamation of a culture rooted in the social and religious moorings of an ancient Chinese civilization that overlaps with an equally ancient Indian and Hindu tradition, creating a unique identity which is neither wholly Indian nor Chinese, but one that draws from both these sets of cultural experiences and establishes itself as almost a culture 'in-between.' Furthermore, the continued importance of clan identities was made evident in the interviews with members of the Chinese-Indian Association, who all identified as being 'Hakka' or 'Cantonese' Chinese-Indians. Their accounts also showed that there are many layers to this label of 'Chinese-Indian.' The Chinese-Indian identity was not just an amalgamation of the 'Chinese' and 'Indian' cultural identities, but more specifically the

amalgamation of an 'Indian' cultural and perhaps national identity, with the particularities of the 'Hakka' Chinese and the 'Cantonese' Chinese identities, as well. Overall, this paper has tried to show that the Chinese-Indian hybrid identity emerged through this community's everyday practices in Kolkata. The Chinese-Indian identity was a synthesis of quintessential Chinese customs and practices with elements from the ethnic Indian culture, creating a hybrid identity that drew upon the Indian past, while simultaneously retaining significant features of its original oriental identity. Therefore, the term 'Chinese-Indian' encapsulates the hybrid nature of this community's cultural practices and is crucial to our understanding of this minority community's diasporic consciousness and its the mode of relating to the majority Hindu Bengali culture with which it coexisted through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **Conclusion**

A range of scholarship on the Chinese-Indian community shows how histories of migration continue to inform identities among diasporic communities and how immigrant communities' identities change as they interact with the host country's culture. In this paper, I have looked at the Indian identity as a rather broad and homogenous category. It will be interesting to explore the intersections between the unique Chinese-Indian cultural space and the more nuanced elements of the dominant Bengali cultural space within which the Chinese-Indians have evolved over the years. For example, can one locate a quintessential Bengali subjectivity in the Literature that this community has produced? Similarly, how do Chinese-owned restaurants in the Tangra region of Kolkata see themselves as drawing from Bengal's vast culinary scene? These could offer avenues through which research on the Chinese-Indians could be furthered.

My research in this paper on the Chinese-Indian community of Kolkata has also tried to show how the histories of nations and regions are almost always interconnected. By studying the histories of migration and mobility and by looking at immigrant communities and the transnational linkages they engendered, we can understand the inter-connectedness of the world. A study into the migratory patterns and mobility of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Asian communities, especially, shows how incredibly dynamic this part of the world was even before most countries in this region became independent nation-states (Amrith 2011:11). Overall, this research has explored a minority community in South Asia that was ignored by mainstream historians who focused instead on other larger, communities having significant impacts on the socio-political developments within the nation-states of South Asia. Moreover, this study has also provided insight, a possible point of reference, and a comparative framework to explore identity formation and modes of belonging among South Asia's other ethnic minority communities. The Jewish and Armenian communities of Kolkata, for instance, lend themselves to a similar analysis as that of the Chinese-Indian community, being more or less contemporaneous with it and most probably subjected to the same forces of nationalism and alienation that characterized Chinese-Indian community culture in Kolkata for several centuries.

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### **Interviews in-Person**

Chinese-Indian Association, Former President. Chinese-Indians of Kolkata. Joita Das. 2015. In-person interview

Chinese-Indian Association, Member 1. *Chinese-Indians of Kolkata* Joita Das. 2015. In-person interview

Chinese-Indian Association, Member 2 (younger generation). *Chinese-Indians of Kolkata* Joita Das. 2018. In-person interview

Chinese-Indian Association, Member 3 (younger generation). *Chinese-Indians of Kolkata* Joita Das. 2018. In-person interview.

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