

The Chinese-Indians after the Indo-China War of 1962: A Study of Community and Identity in the Face of Chaos

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Abstract— The Indian society has been home to a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities and communities. Following the boom of tea plantation in some parts of the country, during the British rule, a large number of Chinese workers were brought into India to work in its tea gardens who stayed back and gave rise to a community of mixed ethnicities called the Chinese-Indians. However, following the Indo-China war of 1962 the country suddenly turned against this section of their citizens, naming them spies and traitors and going to the extent of arresting and deporting many members of this community. Following this traumatic experience this paper aims at studying some works of literature born out of this traumatic experience and tries to understand the ideas of identity, community and the self and how such ideas can be deformed and molded according to politics of identity and propaganda. By studying the works of real life survivors of this event, this paper aims at understanding how identity is formed within a society, how community along with its perception and prejudices influence the formation of identity and how that identity is played out in a politically driven environment.

Keywords— community, crisis, identity, political manipulation, war

I. INTRODUCTION

From the times of the British, with the plantations of the first tea gardens in parts of India, the Chinese had been an integral part of the country. As they arrived on shores in ships, as labourers, they settled within the country and developed a livelihood for themselves. The narrative of the beginning of the Chinese journey to the Indian sub-continent is vividly present in Rita Chowdhury's Chinatown Days where she gives a detailed description of the struggles of Ho Han to come to India after being promised unmatched rewards for just a little hard work, a much better life than that of a slave in China.

With time and more opportunities this handful of people integrated themselves within the Indian community, married Indian men and women and gave birth to the community that came to be known as the Chinese-Indian community. With Chinatowns set up in different regions of the country, as shown in the picture of one such Chinatown in Kolkata, the Chinese-Indians and their culture became an intrinsic part of the Indian social fabric. With the creation of this Chinese-Indian community, came the creation of a new identity: the identity of the Chinese-Indians.

II. IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

In any society the social identity of an individual, to a great extent determines the social standing of that individual or group of individuals. Identity therefore becomes an essential component of a person's claim to standard of social life, honor, social standing and also to a greater extent his/her personal life as well. The development of an individual relies heavily upon the perceptions and the actions of the society to the concerned community or even to other people. As said by George Herbert Mead,

“...societal development and the development of the individuals occur simultaneously. In other words, the consciousness of the individual and the pattern of society are interdependent. Social development stands for not only growth, but also functional differentiation.” (D'Souza,283)

In the study of the community and identity therefore, we can come to an understanding that both the ideas are greatly linked as well as heavily interdependent. While the community to which one belongs can determine the placement of an individual within the society, the community would have had derived such a reputation from its ancestors' actions or social contribution. For instance, there are several prejudices or understandings of how certain communities are known for having great warriors in the past, or others could be known for having great philosophers

or academicians. While these ideas can definitely not be generalized or applied to every member belonging to any one community, the 'respect' or 'reverence' related to such a community would invariably transfer onto the individuals belonging to the same.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNITY

As discussed in the earlier section, the ideas of identity and community are interdependent and also influence each other. A similar state went through the Chinese-Indian community. While the ancestors of this community, the first handful Chinese workers who were brought into the country, developed the image of being hardworking and skilled craftsmen and businessmen, this identity was taken forward by the succeeding generations as well. With their immense knack for business and the unmatched skills as handicraftsmen, especially in the realm of shoe and bag makers, the community rose in status from being one of the immigrant labor sections of the society to being one of the affluent and wealthy communities of the Indian society.

For years this community lived in harmony with the ones around them. Chinatowns, Chinese marketplaces, parlors, restaurants became an integral part of the Indian social life. Even for once there wasn't the concept of 'outsiders' or 'foreigners'. As depicted in Rita Chowdhury's book, the community was closely knit not only within its own members but with the surrounding communities as well.

IV. THE INTEGRATION

The immigrating ships from china hadn't carried families or even women but comprised largely of escaping male slaves or men in search of any work to feed themselves at a time when china was failing to support its growing population. The integration happened really quick considering the fact that the tea plantations had brought in a lot of labors not only from china but from the other states of India as well making the tea gardens home to a wide variety of individuals who were often very young. It was therefore very common to see inter community marriages, as work had put all of their differences aside and put them under the single identical community of the 'tea-garden workers'. With such inter cultural marriages started the integration of the Chinese into the Indian cultural. With the coming of the second generation of this 'tea-garden workers', came about the bilingual, cross-cultural community of the Chinese-Indians. Individuals having a mixed ethnicity with one parent from china and one from India. As time passed this community mingled more and more leaving only a memory of its Chinese ancestry as almost all of these second and third generation Chinese-Indians had never even seen China but kept the memories and the culture of their Chinese

ancestry alive.

This community would be seen adorning the traditional and local Indian clothes along with a mix of the Chinese traditional food culture or even games, especially for the elders. Chowdhury illustrates the Chinatown in Makum beautifully with its 'mekhela-chador adorning young Chinese Indian girls speaking fluently in assamese, inviting friends and neighbours to celebrate a Chinese festival or the elderly people sitting in a town shop and playing the Chinese traditional game of Mahjong while an Indian shopkeeper serves his customers.

The integration was such that perhaps within the lifetime of this community, they hadn't faced any hatred or alienation from their fellow Indians. In another account, Yin Marsh, one of the Chinese-Indians arrested and jailed after the 1962 clash, talks about her childhood days in Darjeeling India. Even though she didn't belong to a mixed ethnic community, her family was an influential part of the society of Darjeeling, making their mark as prominent business owners. She talks of her life in India, and speaks of it fondly, without the slightest hint of any discrimination or disturbance faced due to her cultural identity as a Chinese living in India.

V. THE SUDDEN CHANGE

All of this integrated, harmonious living changed overnight. It is in no way an exaggeration to say that the lives of the Chinese Indians were upturned within a night. After India had lost hope of regaining its territories from the Chinese army, the government had taken it upon itself as a huge failure of its efficiency and also a great breach of its trust and faith upon the Chinese government. It was very evident from India and China's actions, prior to the conflict that both the nations shared a very close and strong bond of friendship. Therefore, China's attack upon India was a direct hit on the immense faith that the Indian government had always put on the Chinese government and in a way lost their credibility in front of their own people. Therefore, the act of arresting and detaining all the people who happened to have a Chinese name, or any link to china through ancestry or culture, can be seen as a final act of redeeming themselves. Simply understood it's an act of displaced anger. What the Indian government couldn't do to the Chinese army was in a way done to its own people who unfortunately, in this situation happened to have a Chinese ethnicity from its ancestors. The horrible situations that the people of this community has been described in painful details as Marsh recounts her personal experiences and Chowdhury presents a retelling of the experiences of several such survivors.

**VI. A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIONS
TAKEN AGAINST THE COMMUNITY**

While the purpose of this paper is not to go into the actions taken against the community by the Indian government, but rather the understanding or the questioning of how something as concrete and basic to the social structure as community and identity can be so easily changed and manipulated, it is important to get a brief idea about the actions taken against this community and the time frame related to it. After the conflict had ended, a general air of resentment towards the Chinese Indians started spreading within the society as a result of continuous public preaching by propagandist political campaigns and some harsh oppositions to the inclusion of the Chinese-Indians within the Indian society. Following this resentment, what seemed absolutely sudden and was in fact very sudden, were the arrests that were made around the country. Policemen would show up at homes and right away identify and take away any individual who happened to have a Chinese origin name, surname or any connection with china through ancestry or culture. Not even the elderly or children were spared and all of them were taken for an unknown time period, without any information regarding their offence, they were not allowed to take any food, clothing or any necessary items other than important papers.

These people were arrested and taken to the local jails, or shelters and then through an even more horrific journey including trucks and barricaded train journeys without food and water, they were shifted to detention camps in Deoli, Rajasthan. After spending months, and often years in these camps many individuals were deported to China and several others had to struggle for years to get released from these camps. This action obviously met with different reactions.

While the 'original' Indians saw this as an act of punishing the Chinese for their actions the Chinese-Indians would definitely see it as an attack on them for no action of their own. In dealing with these reactions though the Indian government had used a lot of manipulation. While they did present it in front of the Indians as an act of punishing the Chinese, when questioned by the Chinese-Indians they presented it as an act on the government's part to actually protect them from the rage of the public. The actions were presented in such a way that it seemed beneficial to both the opposing communities which is not possible in a practical sense.

**VII. THE IDEAS OF COMMUNITY AND
IDENTITY IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS**

The incidents put forth a blazing question very clearly. How can the identity and the community that was accepted and an important part of a country suddenly become the most hated and unwanted of all? The people who were neighbours, friends and acquaintances, were changed to enemies within the time span of a day or two. What is even more questionable is how can newborn babies and young kids be accused and punished for crimes like being enemy spies and traitors of the country. When we view the situation and try to understand the ideas of community and identity that we so dearly hold in our understanding of life, it is bound to create a sense of insecurity. As the title of the paper already says, we need to understand how identity, whether social, cultural or ethnic, are all more or less very easily malleable. Every individual within a society depends heavily upon his/her identity in the aspects of respect, social standing, lifestyle and could even influence their social behavior and personality (if not their personal characteristics).

"Categories of mediation, such as class identification, occupational classification, ethnic identity, skills and educational qualifications enable the self to reflection the meaning of its standing in society. Thus it is through society that human subjects can experience themselves as social beings and the society is the means by which the individual's standing is determined." (Individuation in Indian Society)

The quote clearly shows how an individual depends on the various identities for his/her social standing. Therefore, when a person will see all of his social identities, that make him a part of his society, crumble, and be put within the single category of a traitor, an enemy and a criminal, it is bound to effect his mental health as well. For most of these people, invariably, their own identity had become a matter of shame and fear for them. It can't be helped but be compared to situation of the Jews in Hitler's Germany, where their only crime was their biological and cultural identity. We can consider ourselves lucky that we can only imagine how it would feel to be scared of who we are as people because just being born in a certain community could be the cause of our arrest, punishment and if nothing else then continuous public and social shaming and being disowned.

The struggles of this community however had no end to it. When the people were arrested from their homes, they were not arrested as a family or even detained and allowed to travel as such. Hundreds of families were torn apart, parents never saw their children again, spouses were

separated, many families were broken even before they could have a beginning and this impact was forever. The people from the detention camps were not released to go back to their homes. Many odd number of people were sent to China, to fend for themselves in a foreign country where they were not even welcome.

This brings forth another question: does identity actually have no value? The people were sent to China because they had a Chinese ancestry and therefore the Indian government made the judgement that they belonged to china and should live there. However, the Chinese public and the Chinese government saw these arriving people as outsiders and even more as encroachers. The already emotionally and morally broken lot arrived in China and were put under worse circumstances than they were in India. Treated and provided for as nothing more than slave labourers, they were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and punishment. At a time when the communist regime held a frightening power, life was not better than the detention camps and the countless days of train journey with barricaded windows and without food or water. In Chowdhury's book one can see in excruciating detail the struggle of the people in an unknown land with hostile surroundings, all because they had, perhaps the misfortune, of having Chinese ancestors.

This paper aimed at not finding solutions or any conclusions but rather at raising questions and doubts. By taking a glimpse at the overnight transformation of the social perception towards a community and people who were a cherished and accepted part of the society, we can understand how vulnerable we are as a part of the social structure.

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