

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND THE PRESERVATION OF CHINESE-INDIAN IDENTITY AMONG THE CHINESE COMMUNITY OF KOLKATA

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Abstract

The Chinese community of a Kolkata has been settled in India more than two centuries. The relationship to the host society and to the authorities, particularly the dominant host culture, has gone through different stages with different forms. In the nineteenth century the Chinese community of Kolkata had established several Chinese temples. This study argues that the impact established by the Chinese community of Kolkata particularly on their religious practices is just unique to observe. It examines the adoration of Atchew, Tianhou and goddess Kali added a new dimension or extent to their cultural life that creates a bond to both their Chinese heritage they carried and the place they live. Thus this study perhaps will be able to focus on how the Chinese community safeguarding their age old heritage and identity which they carry forward. The study reveals how these unique practices show the process of acculturation and the creation of a new mixed Chinese-Indian identity. Thus this study will perhaps contribute to the field of social geography not only by helping to understand the multicultural dynamics of Kolkata, but also, will definitely find a concrete way to shape this ethnic enclave community.

Key words: Dimension Heritage Acculturation Multicultural

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INTRODUCTION

During 1840s world has experienced many unrestricted immigrations of Chinese population from 1848-81, Chinese exclusion from 1882-1943 was a common phenomenon, immigrations on restricted quotas from 1944-67 and immigrations on equal basis during 1968 onwards. During each historical period, there was continuous socio- economic adaptation and community development which affected the quality of preservation of Chinese identity.(Biswas, 2017). The challenges of banishment, the isolation, the basic sense of separation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit. This was the only reason identity of culturally displaced people has been put under great uncertainty. (Biswas, 2017). Among various immigrant communities the issue of ethnic and cultural identity was discussed by the scholars from several disciplinary standpoints.(Biswas, 2017). Stuart Hall for example offers two ways of looking at cultural identity. He defines “cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other ,more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold common”.(Hall, 1990). The second definition Hall notes that “there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’, or rather since history has never intervened-‘what we have become’”.(Hall, 1990).

The term “identity” has been used in many ways to emphasize different facets of human self-definition (Gecas, 1995).

According to De Profundis (1897), Oscar Wilde quipped, ‘Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.’ Although not a sociologist, Wilde’s remark evokes the sociological imagination. He aptly gestured toward what many consider a paradox: In modern Western civilization, one thing certainly eludes the supposedly solitary, atomistic, self-made individual – one’s own identity. That is, our identity is perhaps the one thing that is least our own.(Lawler, 2014, p. 510).

Emphasis has been made specifically on Kolkata Chinese community as it is an immigrant enclave community which is intrinsically linked with the larger society. They fight for survival in the various challenging situations had led them to segregate from the common social mosaic.

They build their own socio-economic environment which displays a complicated issue of hybrid identity among the Chinese in Kolkata. It is purposive to bring forward an overall idea about the cultural roots of the Chinese Indian community by examining their history of origin and current events so that they are brought to light among the mainstream society. The Chinese in Kolkata offering an indispensable part of the city's cultural mosaic and without this story of Chinese community in Kolkata some of the spice would be taken out of the experience of living here.

Identity plays the most important role in the process of acculturation, assimilation and adaptation. The Chinese community in Kolkata is not an isolated from the conception that the "Chinese Identity" is almost similar to the other overseas Chinese community. Immigrants' identity is shaped by the specific political and economic circumstances under which particular beliefs and practices serve as boundary markers.(Liu.S, 2011). On this context this paper tries to find out some of the exclusive religious practices among the Chinese community of Kolkata. The pilgrimage to Achipur marked the arrival of the first Chinese immigrant to India, establishment of Taishou gong in Tangra, worshiping of goddesses of Kali were very much indicative about the preservation of Chinese heritage and identity along with the process of acculturation and the formation of new mixed identity which is tagged as Chinese-Indian identity.

1. CHINESE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

Diverse and complex are the two words which can explain the scenario of religious practices among the Chinese community of Kolkata. Both the traditional and localized beliefs are embedded with the religious practices which were acquired after the migrants became permanent residents of Kolkata. The most important religious practices among the Chinese community include the veneration of Tianhou, a female deity considered to be the protector of those who travel by sea, Guandi and the female Bodhisattva Guanyin, the veneration of Atchew who considered being the first immigrant to India, and the worship of Hindu goddess Kali. The study of these unique beliefs creates a new cultural identity in the religious practices indicating the complex, different aspects of both Chinese and Indian identities of the Chinese community in Kolkata.

2.1. THE TAISHOU TEMPLE

The Chinese community of Kolkata worship Tianhou or Mazu. According to Chinese legends, Mazu was a person in real named as Lin Mo who lived between 960 and 987 in Meizhou Island in Fujian province. It is believed that she has the power to communicate with the spirit world and save those in distress, especially who encountered accidents on the seas. Because of such powers she became popular and known as Tianhou or Mazu. The Taishou temple located in Tangra, Kolkata, is perhaps the most interesting and enchanting religious institution frequented by the Chinese community of Kolkata. The earliest interest of the temple was first found in the writings of ChaonerAlabasters's 1858 essay "The Chinese Colony in Calcutta". He gave a detailed information on the importance of this temple meticulously. The local Cantonese carpenters of Bowbazar area were in charge of this temple. They referred Tianhou as "Queen of heaven". Alabaster reports that the temple was well kept and visited once a year by both the Chinese shoemakers and the carpenters in "grand processions".

The temple was renovated in the year 1999 and still considered to be one of the largest Chinese temples in Kolkata. This temple has two halls and the main altar is placed on the second floor of the temple. In the main hall, the statue of Tianhou is placed on the middle altar. There is also an idol of Bodhisattva Guanyin on the left side of Tianshou and to the right there are tombstones of deceased people from the local Chinese community of Kolkata who had contributed to the construction of the temple. Even some of the inscribed boards of the temple are similar to those found in China which clearly conveys that the people who have constructed the Tianhou temple in Kolkata maintained close relationship with temples and local people of China. The altar on the ground floor of the temple has an idol and a large framed photograph of Lady Huang XieShou (Hakka: Wong Hsieh Sau). Lady Shou (literally, 'longevity') is supposed to have worked as a spirit medium in one of the villages of the Mei County in Guangdong province of China. (Xing, 2009, pp. 53-63).

Similar to the Tianhou temples in other parts of countries particularly on South East Asian countries, this temple was built and became popular. The main reason behind this was the main communication route between these two countries i.e. China and Kolkata through the sea routes. The local Chinese believed that Tianhou would not only protect them during their temporary

stays but also provide safe passage to their family members while travelling to Kolkata. It is to be believed that Lady Shou used to retort people's doubts and questions about their future by communicating with the Jade Emperor (the ruler of Chinese heaven) whose shrine has been dedicated to the first floor of the temple. The description of Li in the year 1964, established the fact when she migrated to India, she brought a photograph of Lady Shou and establish it in her home in Bowbazar neighborhood of Kolkata. The cult of Lady Shou was thus imparted from China to India. Soon, Lady Qiu's home attracted large number of followers seeking the medium's help in finding their future. Qiu's home also became a meeting place for the Hakkas, Cantonese and other Chinese residents. They used to gather and share some common belief in divination or in prophecy which like ancestor worship is an ancient Chinese tradition. Now, at the Taishou temple, people venerate Lady Shou, Lady Qiu and the Jade Emperor. So following the traditions most followers come to the temple to divine their futures, usually by using divination sticks that are commonly used in Chinese Buddhist temples. Moreover other religious ceremonies are also conducted in this temple. In fact, every month there is at least one religious event that is scheduled at the temple. Usually paper gifts, made by local Indian craftsmen, are offered to the deities in the temple.

Due to 1962 conflict large amount of deportation and migration of Cantonese from Kolkata, the temple has lost its popularity. Rituals and ceremonies continue to take place there but the main reason of adoration of Tianhou has changed a lot since this is no longer the means of communication between Kolkata and China. Rather they worship Tianhou on the basis of fortune telling and respectful holiness. Some visit the temple because it is a symbol of Chinese traditional culture. For those who live in Kolkata, it has added a new dimension or extent to their cultural life that creates a bond to both their Chinese heritage they carried and the place they live.

2.2. THE ADORATION OF ATCHEW

The religious practices among the Chinese community in Kolkata exhibit prolongation of Chinese traditions that have been imparted directly from China. The traditional religious practices played a crucial role in upholding the hereditary identity of Kolkata Chinese. The religious beliefs of their own and somewhat related to Indian culture have impregnated the Chinese community a distinct character.

Atchew was the first Chinese settler in South Asia and in the year 1778, according to a British document, in return for the tea he offered as a gift to the reigning British Governor General of India Warren Hastings, Atchew received a large land grant near Calcutta. (Bose B. K., 1934). He established a sugar mill and called many Chinese from China to settle in Kolkata and to toil for him. Atchew maintained close contacts with local British officials, which would have been unlikely if he were an ordinary entrepreneur. Soon after he established the sugar mill, for example, Atchew tempted to the British officials that the Chinese living in Calcutta were trying to captivate and enrapture his workers. The Chinese responsible for this, Atchew wrote in his petition dated 1781, were those who had “deserted from the shops and remain in Calcutta without any apparent subsistence” (Bose B. K., 1934, p. :6). From history it is quite clear that some of the Chinese enter to Kolkata by ships that were quite persistent between Kolkata and Canton. So it seems that two distinctive settlements of the Chinese, were brought up, one in Kolkata and the another area where Atchew established his sugar mill. He then started bringing Chinese laborers to work for him at the sugar mill. After the death of Atchew in 1783, this place became known as Achipur.

Almost every Chinese resident in Kolkata attempts to visit Achipur to pay homage to Atchew, the first immigrant from China. At Achipur there is a horseshoe shaped tomb mainly belonging to Atchew. Each and every people of this Chinese community light incense and offer food which is a usual pattern to show respect to their dead ancestors. The adoration of Atchew takes place during the first month of Chinese lunar year. The tomb was reconstructed in the year 2004 by YixingHuiguan which is the oldest Cantonese guild in Kolkata that played important social, cultural and economic roles in the lives of Chinese community in Kolkata. Near Atchew tomb there is one of the oldest Chinese temple present which is dedicated to the God and goddess of the Earth also named as Bogong and Bopo. The two deities are supposed to protect the Chinese settlers and also yield peace and happiness for them in the new land particularly in Kolkata. Though Chinese community in Kolkata worships daily these two deities, yearly pilgrimage to the Bogong–Bopo temple in Achipur is considered to be of utmost importance. Most of the people belonging to the community adore Atchew as they considered him as their ancestor as their founding father of the community in India. The local Chinese used to worship Atchew by

cleaning the tombs of their ancestors; they offer foods and other objects and light incense. These are some common practices of the Chinese for centuries.

So in both cases Chinese-Indian religious practice among the Chinese in Kolkata is observed in the veneration of Atchew and in Taishou temple. In both cases the Chinese community of Kolkata continued to worship their ancestors. They shared a historical past which defined their existence of continuing their own identity in different space and time. In executing different religious practices they have blended Chinese beliefs with their history in India which added a new dimension to the cultural life in different space and time of the cultural history in India.

2.3. THE ADORATION OF HINDU GODDESS KALI

The relationship between practice of veneration of goddess Kali and the issue of identity among the Kolkata Chinese is more intricate. It is quite obvious that the veneration of goddess Kali is an example of acculturation of Chinese community in Kolkata.

The religious activities of this community involve people from different linguistic groups which not only reflect their identity preservation but also a contribution to bringing them together. This impact is the most vibrant on the religious practices of the Chinese community which is visible in the veneration of the Hindu goddess Kali. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Chinese residents of Kolkata used to visit the Kali temple in Kalighat frequently and made offerings of goats and other animals to the goddess. (Hassan, 1982). These visitors, mostly women, perceived Kali as a fertility goddess. In fact, the reason the Chinese in Kolkata were attracted to Kali, and not any other Indian god or goddesses, may have been due to the fact that they did not have a fertility deity in their pantheon. (Xing, 2009).

The importance of veneration of Kali among the community was first observed during 1972 when a Chinese resident named Li Quansheng decided to build a Hindu temple of goddess Kali in Tangra. The locals found a better alternative of Kalighat temple and donated money for its maintenance. Quansheng's younger brother after his death, Li Zhiquan continued to look after the temple and arranged a Brahmin to conduct daily rituals at the temple. Each and every year during Kali puja all the rituals are being performed when turnout at this small temple is huge and

includes both the residents of Chinese community and Indian residents of Tangra. In 1997, MrGuoRensheng (Hakka: Gwok Jan Sing), a Chinese resident of Tangra, provided funds for the renovation of the temple and turned it into one of the most beautiful structures in the neighborhood. It merged local Indian (Bangali) temple style with Chinese architectural tradition. MrGuo also donated the three idols (two of Kali and one of Shiva) that are now housed in the temple. (Xing, 2009, pp. 8-9).

During each Kali puja almost 2000 Chinese gather to witness the puja and and participate in *pushpanjali* also. The puja is conducted in complete Hindu ritual ways but the Chinese light candles, get special Chinese incense sticks and light them. Moreover they burn handmade paper to prevent evil spirits. Most importantly in devotional offering made to godthey used to offernoodles and chopsuey which clearly shows the cross cultural assimilation of the community with the host society.

The veneration of goddess Kali is perhaps the noticeable details of Indian impact on the religious activity of the Chinese community. It is a quite lucid indications that how religious beliefs of host community have lanced through the Chinese community of Kolkata.

3. CONCLUSION

It is understandable that the religious practices tender more direct attachment to the traditional Chinese values, culture and ethnicity which plays a significant role in unifying the community and preserving its Chinese identity. The Chinese community of Kolkata through these religious practices has been able to retain solidarity of family as well as the community. The preservation of the cultural links between the Chinese community in Kolkata and their ancestral homes is possible due to these religious practices performed by this community.

Ancestor worship and prophecy are the two main beliefs that they used to maintain while doing veneration of Atchew and at Taishou temple. These contention or viewpoint is intimately drawing a connection between the ways in which the Chinese residents in Kolkata maintain their ethnic identity and distinctiveness. The veneration of goddess Kali is perhaps aquite lucid indicationof how religious beliefs of host community have lanced through the Chinese

community of Kolkata. Indeed, while there are linguistic, regional and other differences among the Chinese in Kolkata, they share these common religious beliefs. Achipur was set up by the Cantonese, Taishou temple by a Hakka and the Kali temple were initiated by a Burmese–Chinese which manifest or display three different traditions of China together put into practice by the community. So it can be said that these religious activities safeguarding the ethnic identity of the Chinese residents of Kolkata which in repercussion moulding the bond of the Chinese community stronger.

The religious practices of Chinese community in Kolkata are unique on its own aspect. They are associated to the history and experiences of the community in India. Both the veneration at Atchew and Taishou temple honor the contribution of an ordinary Chinese immigrant in India. The worship of Kali is expressive for the community and quite clearly suggests that the Chinese community is enthusiastic and eager to assimilate the practice of Bengali tradition of worshipping goddess Kali i.e. Indian tradition into its religious system. The multicultural and multi-ethnic society of Kolkata was promising enough for Chinese to maintain their exclusivity and continue with their own way of life without much interference from any groups. The fusion of Chinese and India-related beliefs gives the community a distinct cultural identity in wider perspective which eventually with the course of time the community became an integral part of our culture of the city.

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