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## **Introspection in Fieldwork: Ethnographic Research in Chinatown, Kolkata**

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**Abstract:** This article presents my introspection as a researcher studying the Chinese community in Kolkata for my PhD Thesis (to be published), and being a Bengali myself – a stand which can be dichotomous or even contradictory. Doing fieldwork in one’s own community appears to be one of the popular themes of current anthropology which assures a better and ‘authentic’ understanding of the community and does not seem to have the baggage of judgement of an outsider. The Chinese community has been part of the city which I have known since childhood. Being a Bengali gave me the comfort and confidence of being an insider. Yet, like the larger urban Bengali society, I was aware of the presence of these communities, but at the same time, was indifferent towards the particularities. We have shared the same neighbourhood space, however from two very different socio-cultural positions. The interactions between the Chinese and the Bengali community have been sporadic, probably insufficient to generate a true interest and compassion in each other. Even now, when the Chinese community is under the limelight of the media as a disappearing community and there are news reports and documentaries, most of these are based on evoking a sense of unfamiliarity. Hailing from the Bengali community, I had to confront the stereotypical ideas about both the communities during my fieldwork and yet again discover the inevitability of interactions shaping myriad forms of cultural practices. Moreover, though the commonality between myself and the community has been the city, I could not claim this community as my own. I invariably recognized that I belong to the majority and feared that I would never be able to understand this community from the community’s perspective. However, I evolved as researcher in this period when I eventually learnt and accepted that my account of the narratives of the community would invariably

reflect my unique stand. This article does not conclude any final view on any community. It is rather a monologue describing the fieldwork experience while understanding my positionality.

*Keywords:* Ethnographic fieldwork, diaspora, community, narrative, reflexivity

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### **How the British and Bengalis saw the *Chinaman***

When Indumadhab went to China in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, he found this new land to be strikingly different from Bengal<sup>2</sup>. His travelogue depicts trivial details of daily life in China. It appears that he had a keen interest in understanding the social system and comparing the cultural practices of China with the Bengali way of life. The vivid descriptions show that he indeed had the qualities of an ethnographer. His travelogue can be considered an example of 'thick description' which not only talks about a community different from his own, but also reflects his views on the Bengali community. His travelogue which is vividly descriptive with frequent comparisons between the cultures of Bengal and China, is primarily written from a perspective of an urban Bengali. He keenly observed the details while simultaneously comparing them with his familiar Bengali way of life. His point of reference was the Bengali culture which he was familiar with. On a second thought, what might be surprising is that it appears he did not know about the existence of a Chinese community in his city. He never mentioned the Chinese of Kolkata in his work – his trip to China was the first time he came across the Chinese. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinatown in Tiretta Bazar, Kolkata was thriving with businesses owned by the Chinese and immigrants arriving almost every day. Surprisingly, as an educated man hailing from a Bengali middle-class family who was deeply interested in observing cultures, he was ignorant of the Chinese community of Kolkata. His narrative confirms that he never came across Chinese culture (as he mentions it) before he went to China and that he was unaware of a very similar, if not same Chinese culture flourishing in Kolkata.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note (see reference: Mallik, 2010): Some sections of Indumadhab's travelogue were published in magazines like *Bangobashi*, *Shahitya* and *Bharati*. It was first published as a complete travelogue in 1906. It has been recently republished in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bengal is a historical region in the north-eastern part of India which also included the People's Republic of Bangladesh earlier. The people from this region speak Bengali language and are called Bengali as well.

This obliviousness to other cultures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kolkata is disappointing but not unprecedented. It is probably not Indumadhab alone who was unaware of the existence of the Chinese in Kolkata. As I started to explore the archival material, I found very few works on the Chinese of Kolkata. Neither a majority of British writers, nor the Bengalis considered the Chinese as their subject of writing frequently. In the very little archival material which I could find, the Chinese were portrayed in a peculiar mystified way. There has been very little mention of the historicity of the Chinese community in ethnographic works. During the colonial period, when the Chinese settled in Kolkata, they were largely overlooked while documenting the day-to-day activities in the city which is unusual because the British in India had a tendency of extensive documentation, which has turned out to be extremely beneficial for researchers, as the archives in the United Kingdom and India are rich with materials providing vivid description of that era (for example see, Parks, 1975; first published in 1850; Roberts, 1845). The Chinese community in Kolkata, however, remains a mysterious exception. On the other hand, a lack of interest in the Chinese in Kolkata among the Bengali writers probably reflected the general attitude of the Bengali community. While the other communities were considered a salient part of the city, the Chinese were largely ignored. Somehow, the Armenians and Greeks in Kolkata during the colonial period were considered an extension of the dominant 'white' culture (Stark, 1894). The Muslims were not a part of either the mainstream English society or Bengali Hindu culture. However, the large population of their community made it easy for them to have a strong imprint on the cultural landscape of the city. But the Chinese? They did not match any of these categorizations. Roy was one of the few Bengali writers who gave a vivid sketch of Chinatown. He wrote<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> ei ye cine-pārā, kalakātāra mastya ekaṭi drasṭṭbāya sthāna. Barabājāre māṇṇyāridera, mechobājāre musalamāndera o curaṅgite iuropiyādera jātiya biśeshatbera chapa āche khuba spaṣṭa - tabu se saba pārāteō kalakātā āpanāke ekadama hāriye pheleni. kintu āpni cinepārār bhitare ecabāra ḍhucuna, kintu āpni cinepārār bhitare ecabāra ḍhucuna kintu āpni cinepārār bhitare ecabāra ḍhucuna, āpnāra āra mane habenā ye, āpani satya satyāi kalakātāteī āchena. rātre ekhānkar ālochāyā, lokjāna, kathābārtā, gara-bāri sabai sudūra cinera bicitro smṛiti āpanāra modhṇe jagiye tulbe.

saru rāstā, sāpera moto eke beke dudhārera bārira mājhkhāna diye chole geche. Āpni calte calte dupāsei dekhbena, kothāo kona ektālā bārira pathera dhārera kholā ghare base cine-mā pathikdera sāmnei prākāśye buka khule asaṅkoce śisuke stnyāpāna karācche, kothāo bārira darajāra upare durbodhya citrobaṭa cine-bhāshara raṇina bigyāpana jhulche, kothāo eka cine tānsena acina surera adbhut gāna jure diyeche, kothāo-bā tina cāra jana cinemāyāna tādera anusbar-bahul bhāshāe kī eka prasaṅga niye ālocanā karche. pratī padei prāye dekhbena, ektā cine-sarāi bā ekele dharanera hotela, kiṃbā juṇyakhānā o candukhorera āddā athabā cainika dharmamandira. ābahāowā ekebāre natuntaro (Roy, 1923 this article was reprinted in 2016).

This Chinatown is one of the main attractions of Kolkata. The Marwaris in Bara Bazar, Muslims in Mechho Bazar or the Europeans in Chaurangi have a distinct influence on the area but you can still find Kolkata there. The moment you enter Chinatown, you will not feel that you are in Kolkata. Especially at night, the light and shadow, the people, their conversations and the houses will remind you of far-away China.

You will find a narrow road meandering through the housing – if you keep on walking, you will see a Chinese mother breast-feeding her child in front of strangers; colourful, picturesque but incomprehensible Chinese advertisements hanging on the front doors; a Chinese musician singing a peculiar song in a strange tune; or three, four Chinese men having a discussion in their nasal tone. In every few steps, you will come across a Chinese motel or a modern hotel. You will also find a gambling house, an opium den or a Chinese temple. The atmosphere is completely different here (1923, p. 28).

Roy's shock at seeing a Chinese mother breastfeeding in public is primarily a product of the orthodox Bengali morality. His description of Chinatown reflects a strong judgemental perspective influenced by the conservative Bengali society of that time. Narratives like these reveal that Chinatown was seen as distinctively different from the other Bengali neighbourhoods. The rituals and customs of these two communities were incomparable and while the Bengalis were fast adopting the western lifestyle of the colonizers, they considered the Chinese culture to be too outlandish. In fact, often it was the Chinese who were considered responsible for this cold reciprocity. Another explanation of this indifference was the attitude of Bengali society engrained by the caste system. The rigid hierarchy of the caste system gave very little option to develop genuine interest in others. The Chinese neighbourhood was naturally very outlandish for the Bengalis whose point of reference was the conservative Bengali society with its customs and restrictions.

The suspicion that Bengalis had about the Chinese was shared by the British to a large extent. A similar account can be found in the rare mention of the Chinese by the British. Alabaster (1858, p. 368) stated that this community did not give up any of their customs to mingle with the rest of the population. The Chinese were part of the city but in a

passive way. They were only mentioned along with other communities to elaborate on the multicultural characteristics – such as a numerical estimation of the Chinese population made by W. Birch in 1837, who was the Superintendent of Police of Kolkata (mentioned in Finch's work, as cited in Mukherjee, 1977), or a description of the Tiretta Bazar of Kolkata by a visiting British traveller. However, as the Chinese community was too submissive to create any antipathy, they did not invoke curiosity. But is it indeed the community which denies any possibility of communication? Most likely, the common explanation that the Chinese of Kolkata are rarely noticed primarily because they did not want to be, is dangerously simplified. For the two communities – British and Bengali, the opinionated perspective towards the Chinese has two different reasons. The British depiction of culture in India – whether it is Hindu or Chinese – reveals the typical superior perspective of colonizers. It is evident in Parks' (1850) travelogue or Roberts' (1845) account that their perspectives are distant and unaccustomed with any other way of life. The post-colonialists (Said, 1979; Spivak, 1988) have questioned and categorically questioned these representations, which also explains the tendency of presenting the Chinese or their culture in a particular way. On the other hand, for the Bengali society with its rigid caste system, the Chinese were far too unfamiliar. From the dressing style (when Hindu women were habituated to cover their heads) to eating habits (eating pork was a taboo for most of the 'upper-caste' Hindus), differences between these two cultures were apparent. Although it was also the time when the British-led modernization was slowly becoming a part of the Hindu households, yet the resistances were intense. Bengali authors ridiculed this change and the newly educated *babus*<sup>4</sup> of Bengali society (Singha, 1991; Mukhopadhyaya, 1982). Apart from pure commercial interest – some autobiographies mention Chinese salesmen in the Bengali neighbourhoods, or the Chinese craftsmen (Tagore, 1973) – the Bengali society of the colonial time did not give it a chance to interact with the Chinese.

Although the cosmopolitan versatility of Kolkata was immense, the European quarters and Bengali quarters were marked, yet overlapping. Different *Paras*<sup>5</sup> of Kolkata were

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<sup>4</sup> *Babu* is used for addressing a man with respect. In Bengali, the connotation of *babu* or *babu* culture in the colonial period depicted a class of newly rich. In the book *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, which was first published in 1862 (Singha, 1991), Kaliprasanna extensively wrote about the *babu* culture. sarcastically commented on their lifestyle and morality and considered them as vulgar.

<sup>5</sup> *Para* in Bengali is recognized as a socio-cultural, functional space. The term is an inseparable part of the description of spatial concentration of a community and organic informal division of a city, town or a village. The *para* concept was the most prevalent during the colonial period with the very rigid spatial boundary

examples of territorial demarcations on the basis of caste, class and community identities. The city which was essentially made by the British, has the imprint of colonial architecture in every corner of the city. The northern part of Kolkata was essentially dominated by the Bengali population. Central Kolkata was the hub of the colonial rulers with all the important administrative offices and its design reflected the colonial grandeur. In the colonial period, the southern side of the city was not developed, and the city primarily consisted of the northern and the central part. These two blocks were, however, not isolated entities, but we see numerous examples of cultural interaction. While discussing the myth of these two distinctly different cities, Chattopadhyay (2005) explains that in all possibility, what the colonized considered pure European style architecture was already a product of a “colonial hybrid culture” (2005, p. 135). In a colonial city like Kolkata, it was indeed difficult to strictly demarcate. However, social interaction, I would argue, was limited and cautious.

Accepting the inevitable intermixing, the neighbourhoods of Kolkata still had different ways of life and the cultural landscape at neighbourhood levels varied greatly. The in-between region of North and Central Kolkata, was occupied by the smaller communities. Like others, the Chinese also settled in the fringe areas of Central Kolkata, which was essentially neither British nor Bengali. Communities like the Chinese and the Anglo-Indians chose this transitional zone due to its proximity to both the communities, yet there was considerable physical and cultural distance. As most of their businesses relied on either the Bengali or the British, the locational factor was crucial. The street directory published by Thacker's Press and Directories Ltd. in 1929 explicitly shows a thriving Chinese neighbourhood in Tiretta Bazar area where almost every building was occupied by the Chinese. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on Blackburn Lane, we find Sheong Son living at house number 8 next to the Chooney Thong Club at house number 14 (Thacker's Press and Directories Ltd., 1929, p. 102). In the same area, a mixed population of Jewish, Anglo-Indians and few Indian communities like Marwaris can be found. Some Marwari businessmen would have their shops here. On Westson Street, a Marwari, Basanta Lal Ghanshayam Dass, and E. Judah lived at number 77, surrounded

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defined for each caste. In present days, the term *para* is used for depicting the locational reference of a community. There is an immense significance of the history of each *para*, as they give an idea of the caste politics and occupational structure of the society. Sarat Chanda's *Abhagir Swago* or Bibhuti Bhushan Bondhyapadhyay's *Pother Panchali* are some of the works in Bengali literature which brilliantly cited the social and cultural life of different urban and village *paras* (Also See, Chattopadhyay, 2000, p. 157 for a comprehensive understanding of *Para*).

by small enterprises like Num Chong & Co., Chap Lee & Co. and the National Shoe Company. This area did not have the elitist British planning with wide roads and buildings with Corinthian columns, neither did it match with the scenes of a Bengali neighbourhood. The Tiretta Bazar area was indeed the epicentre of a cultural conundrum where these communities created a space of their own. This basic layout is still traceable today. The reason for describing the urban landscape is to re-emphasize that along with other communities, the Chinese were inherently a part of the city. At the same time, the cultural interactions and representations were minimal.

I would argue that this pattern of (mis)representation of this community among the urban population of Kolkata depicts a complex history of social interactions between two communities. This was further complicated after the 1962 Indo-Sino war. However, in this post-globalization era, there are less possibilities of any particular caste or community having hegemonic control over a neighbourhood, the power structure now functions more on the basis of class and community identity. The physical space that the communities share is a fertile ground for cultural interactions and at the same time displays the power equations of the city.

If we compare the Chinese with other communities, few contemporary scholars have taken up extensive fieldwork in this community. Bose (1969) and Hasan (1982) presented two very comprehensive works on the Chinese. The torchbearer will always be Ellen Oxfeld (1993) for her phenomenal work on this community. Of course, Bonnerjee (2010) in her PhD thesis and later on in her work with Blunt (Blunt & Bonnerjee, 2013) has extensively studied the community from the perspective of a cultural geographer, exploring the shared neighbourhood space. On the other hand, Zhang (2009; 2010; 2015) focused on the cultural identity of the community. Hailing from the Chinese community of Kolkata itself, Liang (2007) had a different perspective to study the community. As per Zhang, being a Chinese was an advantage while interacting with the Chinese of Kolkata. Presumably, she could easily be a part of them. For Liang, this is her own community, she can claim to have an authentic view of the community's perspective. Each of them has their own perspective look at the community depending on the subject.

### **Treading Carefully**

I started to plan my fieldwork with a sense of jeopardy. The academic curiosity or thrill of conducting fieldwork in this largely secluded community met with some serious word of caution. My thesis looks into the identity narratives of the Chinese community to know the role of the legislative and social tag of a minority in shaping their identities. This objective required me to conduct fieldwork in the Chinatowns of Kolkata (Tiretta Bazar and Tangra), following the participant observation method along with focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. For this fieldwork, I did not qualify to either of these two above said advantageous situations of studying my own community or being a Chinese myself, but at the same time the field itself was not completely new to me. As a Bengali who grew up in Santiniketan, a small university town near Kolkata. I had spent a considerable amount of time in Kolkata, which became my second home. Moreover, my paternal ancestral home is near Tiretta Bazar– the old Chinatown. I was familiar with the physical space as well as accustomed with the cultural expressions. My fieldwork was not native ethnography, yet I knew the area, the people – if I had wandered around, I would not attract any special attention as an outsider. Although I was not supportive of the general unpopular impression of the Chinese among the Bengalis, I was apprehensive about how this factor would play a role. Would I be excessively sympathetic while interacting with them? Or would they not be comfortable with me talking about their life?

After I started my fieldwork, I immediately realized the probable impact of non-communication between the two communities on my fieldwork. I had expected that exploring my contacts in the Bengali community would surely help me in finding some initial links with the Chinese community. At the same time, I might get a better preview of the community from the perspective of the Bengalis. This would eventually help me to understand the reciprocal relationship of the communities in the backdrop of the vibrant cosmopolitan culture of Kolkata. As my thesis focused on identity narratives of a diasporic community, I was curious about the general views and behaviour towards this community. As a researcher, I wanted to explore the views about this community, which would give me an idea of the cultural interaction evolving through social stigmas, if any. This would eventually lead me to a better understanding of the trajectories of their narratives. However, the option of exploring my Bengali connections failed miserably. None of my friends, family and acquaintances knew anyone in the Chinese community. I assumed they would share their views with me and probably expected emotional



support as well. Many of the people I knew outside the academic circle, were supportive of my research but not the fact that I was doing my fieldwork in Chinatown. A series of comments were hurled towards me:

- “Don’t eat anything there. They put pork in everything.”
- “The area is not safe, why did you choose that area?”
- “No! I never went to Chinatown. Why would I? What is there to see? It is such a strange place.”

A few told me that they have been to Chinatown only because of the food. A girl from my neighbourhood told me that it was not difficult to identify a *Chinki*<sup>6</sup> girl – “just go to the colleges and you will see them wearing the shortest hot-pants”. With these responses, I figured out that according to many, the Chinese were not an interesting enough topic for a PhD project. Most of my Bengali family and friends were either ignorant about their existence or their knowledge was limited to identifying famous Chinese restaurants. Moreover, the very idea of working with a community which they did not even consider worth noticing was amusing for them, if not embarrassing. Though my objective of contacting the Chinese community through my Bengali connections was not successful, the responses sketched an idea of the relationship-equation with the Chinese.

On the other hand, I had contacted a few people from the community on social media (Facebook), who replied. I started my fieldwork with knowing only two people from the community. Here, initially I overestimated my role as a researcher who was from the Bengali community. I had the security of knowing the city well and, with years of living near Chinatown, to some extent, I presumed that I knew this community well. The first few days of fieldwork put me in a dichotomous situation where I had to challenge my stand as a Bengali researcher. My stand as a researcher in this case was not ambiguous. I rather belong to a community which did not have a close relationship with the Chinese. I had to give up the comfortable notion that I was accustomed with the neighbourhoods of Kolkata and that I had so far shared the cultural space with many communities including the Chinese. On the other hand, I had the dilemma of whether the community would find it easy to talk to me? If I would ever get an insider’s view? Anthropologists have agreed on the challenges of studying one’s own community. Many of the anthropological textbooks (Haviland, et al., 2014) suggest that a previous experience of conducting fieldwork in a foreign culture can be enriching – empowering the researcher

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<sup>6</sup> *Chinki* is an ethnic slur used in India to describe people with mongoloid features.

with the experience needed for studying his or her own community. My stand was quite unique here. I did know Chinatown as a part of Kolkata, but I was neither aware of the diverse cultural practices nor did I know the everyday life of the community. From one perspective, I did my fieldwork in a familiar city, but from the other, I was starting the fieldwork in a small secluded community which was alien to my Bengali self.

However, for my research, I did not realize in the beginning that I had to unlearn whatever I knew about the city. In the initial days, my guide T1<sup>7</sup> introduced me to the community. He took me to meet his family and friends. It did not take much time to reach a comfort level where I was accompanying them to the small Dosa Corner<sup>8</sup> for snacks after the practice for the cultural event for the Chinese New Year Festival. Since my home in Kolkata was in the neighbourhood next door, I had assumed that I knew the area well. I was wrong. I might have known the locational details, but they were mere factual details. I did not experience the daily life of Chinatown. Moreover, how I perceived Kolkata as my city which is primarily Bengali, the Chinese knew the city in a different way. For example, a strong sense of territory defined the Chinese locality. The Chinese consider the southern part of the city to be a predominantly Bengali area, a place where the rich people live. Though some of them eventually moved out of the Chinatowns of Tiretta Bazar and Tangra<sup>9</sup>, they often chose a place which had a mixed population. For T2<sup>10</sup>, the only place where he felt at home was Tiretta Bazar. He had recently bought a place near the Airport, which is a newly developed area considered to be a posh locality. He clearly did not like living there and soon started to come to Tiretta Bazar every day. He said since he had moved there, he had to join the maintenance committee of the housing society, but it did not feel like a community there. For him, everything is very fragmented and superficial now. I could, on the hand, go to the markets of South Kolkata and roam around in the streets in late afternoon. Numerous

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<sup>7</sup> T1 is a man in his 40s. He is enthusiastic about various community activities and part of Cultural Association of the community. He is a singer who sings in Chinese, Hindi, English and Bengali.

<sup>8</sup> *Dosa* is a snack which has originated in South India but eventually became popular all over India.

<sup>9</sup> The Chinatown or the Tangra area, which is known to be the present Chinatown, came up much later. The Chinese initially settled in the Tiretta Bazar area, the pocket between Brabourne Road and CR Avenue, as well as in the surrounding area. Even today, one can sporadically find a Chinese household in one of the old apartment buildings on College Street or B.B. Ganguly Street. The Chinese community, or mainly the Hakka people from the community, started to move to Tangra for the ease of managing their tanneries during the First World War.

<sup>10</sup> T2 is a man in his 60s who retired as a chef. He used to live in Tiretta Bazar, but he decided to buy a flat and move to a newly constructed housing complex near the airport. However, his children do not live in Kolkata and he feels lonely in the new house. He comes to Tiretta Bazar almost every day, and enthusiastically takes part in the community activities. When I interviewed him, he was the President of the Nam Soon Club.

relatives of mine lived in all these neighbourhoods where I could just drop by for a tea. Except for a few, most of the Chinese with I have interacted consider the Tiretta Bazar area as their home and the heart of the city. The clear discomfort in their narratives about other parts of Kolkata made me think about how different my experience is. Being a Bengali, I would not be stared at or asked questions about myself, which is an everyday experience for them. On the other hand, when I started to wander around in the Chinatown of both Tiretta Bazar and Tangra, I could see that most likely, a Bengali girl of my age usually did not roam around these areas. The teashop owner would be attentive or the Rikshaw-puller would charge me more. Very soon, as I became a part of Tiretta Bazar area and the glances changed into friendly smiles. For me acceptance came gradually but did not take much time.

My initial interactions in this Tiretta Bazar area made me curious about the uneasiness in the community interactions. Surprisingly, as I started my interviews and interactions, the Chinese would often ask me about my experience in their community as a Bengali. Or they would refer to some common joke, food or incident which they presumed I would know as a Bengali. From my experience with the Bengalis, I was expecting a great deal of hardship in interacting with the community. I had assumed that they would not be too interested to sit down and talk with a Bengali girl for hours. Nevertheless, I had decided to approach them casually. For the first few meetings, I was the only one to talk. I spoke about myself in detail, and they took a keen interest in listening. Interestingly, my research interest in them would not provoke much curiosity. They would ask me about life in Germany or how many siblings do I have. These common topics would start a conversation. A1<sup>11</sup> would talk about how he was worried about his daughter – “your father must be worried about you and your safety too, you know”. They would eventually talk about the unpleasant incidents as well, but never related it with me. They would mention it as if I knew the context. For example, after the 1962 Indo-Sino war, it was the Bengalis who illegally took over their businesses in Tangra, assaulted them on the streets. The Chinese did not talk about the war a lot, instead they talked about their flourishing business before the war. While chatting in the clubs among themselves, they did not change the version because I was sitting at one corner. I was

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<sup>11</sup> A1: I was introduced to A1 by a Bengali man who is married to a Chinese girl. A1 is his father-in-law. I soon became quite close to A1 and started to accompany him to different Chinese clubs where he introduced me to his friends. He is a man in his 70s who lives in Bow Barracks (the famous Anglo-Indian quarter in Central Kolkata). A1 is warm and quiet, yet he likes to talk about Chinatown and the olden days.

primarily a listener and not one who only cared for topics of interest. I tried to link between stories – understand the larger urban context. For the old men at the Club, I became a part of their group. With the big old table which still had its shine of fine polishing, or the photographs hanging from the wall, they would invariably find me sitting in the corner. I would listen to their long conversations and arguments, most of the time, they would forget about my existence in the room, but a cup of tea would be ordered for me. With those hours of talks, I was able to have a glimpse of the daily struggle of a Chinese in Kolkata.

Scholars like Appadurai (1991) or Hall (1990) emphasize that the cultural interactions and formations are diverse. Globalized Kolkata is very much a part of these dynamics as well. As Appadurai (1991) mentions the linkages between the ‘scapes’, I would argue at local level, these interactions shape the politics of social relations. In the colonial era, the cosmopolitan image of Kolkata was due to the different communities who came to this city for economic opportunities. However, at present, Bengalis have increasingly been worried that their role as a majority would be threatened by other communities as well as their businesses would be taken over by other communities. The collective identity of the Bengali community also has the same rigidity of what Parekh (2008) calls the major drawback of this notion of group struggle, where stereotypical images of the oppressing others can be formed or a blind faith in one version of the history can prove misleading. Collective identity or community identity might gradually transform into a conservative, subjugating system playing an authoritative role and could compel the individuals to be a part of the community. The initial objective of recognition beyond the stereotypical categorization and related discrimination ultimately converts into performing a stereotypical ritualistic doctrine. From another perspective, I see the caste system of India to be a reason behind this indifference. The caste system functions through creating rigid boundaries in the society which discourages open and free interactions. As Jodhka argues, the caste system managed to survive because of its adaptive nature. He states that “caste too reproduces itself in contemporary India through active processes of ‘prejudice’ and ‘discrimination’” (Jodhka, 2016, p. 239). Suspicion and discrimination are the trajectories of the functionality of the caste system which, as Jodhka mentions, should be understood in the same framework as status and power (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, why did I not see any impact of the subtle tension between the Chinese and other communities on my relationship with them? Why did they voluntarily focus more on the common aspects of our lives like the new malls, food and *Durga Puja*<sup>12</sup> festival? As a Bengali, I might have been unaware of this part of the city or the knowledge was superficial, but for the Chinese, they were accustomed with the lifestyle of the Bengalis. Parallel to their “Chineseness”<sup>13</sup>, they have known the Bengali culture and its imprints in their lives. For some of the Chinese men, it was a matter of pride when their children married Bengalis belonging to higher castes. The famous example of *Chinese Kalibari*<sup>14</sup> in Tangra can be one of the other examples of hybridity. There was no chance of misunderstanding me as a part of the community, yet the community members chose the Bengali-connection between us as a platform. It took me a while to recognize the profuseness of the hybrid forms, which I thought was specifically mentioned in a conversation with me. Once I became a regular participant in the Club’s evening meetings, I would hear about almost the same topics which I would find in any Bengali *adda*<sup>15</sup>.

### **Striking the Balance**

Anthropology has been dealing with the complexity related to the role of the researcher, narration and the unavoidable imprint of the observer’s perspective. *Writing Culture* has presented a temporal journey of this dilemma in the most comprehensive way. The classical anthropological method had maintained a distinct balance between subjective observation and keeping a strict objective distance while writing. This tendency started to change in the 1960s, when authors began to incorporate their personal experiences as a key element of their writing, breaking the previous norm of maintaining the “objective” distance (Clifford, 1986). It is by now clear that I am for obvious reasons inspired by the *writing culture* and the subsequent movement. Rather than doting on achieving the ideal objective perspective of the researcher, I tend to focus more on the

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<sup>12</sup> *Durga Puja* is an annual Hindu festival in India, mainly popular among the Bengalis.

<sup>13</sup> I have tried to locate the meaning of ‘Chineseness’ in the identity narratives with references to works of Ang (2001) and Chow (1998) in my thesis.

<sup>14</sup> *Chinese Kalibari*: The temple of the Goddess Kali in the Tangra area is also a place of worship for the Chinese people living there. They regularly pray and perform the Hindu rituals. This *Kalibari* (where *bāri* in Bengali means house) is an interesting example of how culture interactions shape hybrid forms.

<sup>15</sup> The word *adda* in Hindi means a place where people meet. It is mostly used as an informal word. In Bengali *adda* means the gathering of people for an informal chat. It is typically associated with the Bengali neighbourhood culture (also see, Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 180-204).

larger context, which includes myself, the socio-cultural landscape (a space defined by the interaction) and the historical references. Initially, I had two major doubts about my role – the first was, whether my fieldwork would qualify as native ethnography, and the other doubt was regarding my Bengali identity. Given the complicated relationship with the Bengalis in the past, how would the Chinese perceive me as a researcher? While explaining my role as a researcher in Kolkata, I find support in Narayan's (1993) argument that a native researcher having a complete insider's view is an unrealistic assumption. So, a native might differ from the participants on multiple issues. She proposes a greater emphasis on reflexivity of the researcher or "shifting identities in relationship with the people" (ibid., 1993, p. 682). But this does posit some challenges as well. As a researcher I stumbled upon questions like, "How do I present myself as a Bengali researcher to the community – will I read between the lines too much? Or, on the contrary, would the participants expect me to understand every context?" Chock (1986, p. 89) describes her miscommunication with the participants where they assumed she would understand their ironical way of talking, but she did not – this was a possibility in my research too. On the other hand, "being a Bengali will I feel responsible for the ill-treatments they have faced so far?", "will I try to compensate that by being over-sympathetic?" and "are they going to treat me as a researcher or primarily as a Bengali?" Most importantly, how to know what were these 'over' and 'too much'? Surprisingly, though not a native, I have found multiple ways where I could find a common connection with the community. This is not to fake a native identity but to initiate a conversation, as an icebreaker, or to understand the context better.

Though initially I found the approaches of post-modern ethnography quite attractive, I also learnt in the process to adopt the appropriate ones for my objective of study and leave the rest. I had opportunities where I could represent/work along with the community, but I had to avoid this kind of critical ethnography (Cushman, 2002). Though I focused on my role as a self-reflective and ethically responsible researcher, the emotional detachment in certain situations was not easy. I constantly felt that I was not doing enough for the community. Or, when I had the chance of making a change which is ideally the question of social justice which I was asking in my research, I chose to be neutral. But eventually, I managed to restrict my interventions. Similarly, I started to react less to the comments Bengalis made about the Chinese. I was of course susceptible to the emotional attachments I developed with the community, but I started to

recognize them as critical inputs. Landén (2011) proposes that an ethnographic researcher is not an entity separate from the subject. According to her, the process of description (identification) is a way to understand the preconceived ideas the researcher brings to the field which defines the ethnographic researcher. She emphasizes that these “expectations and ideals” should be questioned as the “researcher self” is made by them (2011, p. 548).

My initial dilemma of being a researcher who is also a Bengali turned into an advantageous situation where I could explore my unique stand. I was able to recognize the hybrid expressions where the Chinese have adopted Bengali rituals over time. I was able to trace the Bengali element in their narratives. In a similar situation when she studies her own community in Assam, Nupur Barua (Barua, 1999) mentions that for her most of the information coming her way was so familiar and mundane that it appeared to be insignificant for her research. I have tried to capture every trivial detail of the known cultural landscape for understanding a different perspective. On the other hand, the narratives collected from the Bengali community reflected how the larger urban society perceives the Chinese. I followed these references in the narratives of the Chinese community as well to see how these views influenced and restructured the narratives of the Chinese. As Hall mentions, the foundation of a diasporic identity involves “always a politics of identity, a politics of positions” (1990, p. 226). I have found what Hall calls “a matter of becoming as well as being” (ibid.) the common dilemma of the Indian-Chinese community. Moreover, as I interacted with the Bengali community as well, I realized the essentiality of Hall’s (1990) interpretation of the importance of the reconstruction of history and culture for understanding the community’s perspective. Though the motive of my representation of the narratives was to present the thought process of the community in the most elaborate way possible, this was not possible with keeping myself at a distance. I have tried to incorporate the contextual relevance of any observation or narratives which I thought is an integral part of my work. After one year of my fieldwork, I had the belief that I was able to be the listener. In one of those days, I was wrapping up my work at Si-Up club one night. A2 said, “you know, you can always come here. PhD work or no PhD work”. The sadness of that dimly lit room and the old photographs hanging on the walls became almost tangible as I realized once again that being neutral has always been a theoretical solution.

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