



Urban Ethnic Space: A Discourse on Chinese Community in Kolkata, West Bengal

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Article Info

Article History

Received on:
20 August 2018
Accepted in Revised Form on:
31 December, 2018
Available Online on and from:
21 March, 2019

Key Words

Ethnicity
Social Processes
Culture
Ethnic Landscape

Abstract

The modern urban societies are pluralistic in nature, as cities are the destination of immigration of the ethnic diaspora from national and international sources. All ethnic groups set a cultural distinction from another group which can make them unlike from the other groups. Every culture is filled with traditions, values, and norms that can be traced back over generations. The main focus of this study is to identify the Chinese community with their history, social status factor, changing pattern of Social group interaction, value orientation, language and communications, family life process, beliefs and practices, religion, art and expressive forms, diet or food, recreation and clothing with the spatial and ecological frame in mind. So, there is nothing innate about ethnicity, ethnic differences are wholly learned through the process of socialization where people assimilate with the lifestyles, norms, beliefs of their communities. The Chinese community of Kolkata which group possesses a clearly defined spatial segmentation in the city. They have established unique modes of identity in landscape, culture, economic and inter-societal relations. So, social processes of accommodation and assimilation with other community is the main focus of the study, where and how does the Chinese community occupy the social space of their livelihood is being examined. Data are mainly collected from the primary observation as well as some secondary literature. Primary field study consists of a questionnaire survey. In this paper, the authors try to appraise the socio-economic adjustment of this ethnic community and to find their actual role in the social milieu of Kolkata.

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Introduction

In both underdeveloped and developed countries urban areas are an exhibit with different ethnic communities having their own form of landscape. In the colonial period, cities of the different countries are the lucrative opportunities open for business inertia. Some Indian cities are also not out of them. The present Kolkata previously known as Calcutta by the British colonial period made this piece of land as a cosmopolitan precinct. Different globe tottering Asian (Chinese), European, Armenian, Greek as well as provincial communities (Marwari, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bihari, Oriya, South Indians etc.) of India, come over Kolkata mainly for testing their business fortune. In that connection, the multicultural community creates a mosaic of landscape having lots of heterogeneity. Nature of ethnic communities in an urban area is very much complex because it creates a cross-cutting impact over racial characteristics, national heritage, language, religion etc. So, ethnic identity factors are

invariably changes according to cultural practices. All the ethnic communities in urban areas try to make an interactive space between them. So these communities try to establish their group identities, as well as make group interaction, acceptance and adapt the multiple languages. So in that sense, Kolkata is one of the cities in India which has passed through glorious history from the pre-colonial period to post-colonial period. The transformation from the small core of villages like Kalikata, Sutanuti, Gobindopur to a megacity and people of diversified culture made a vital imprint on the social landscape. These entire ethnic groups in Kolkata shared not only geographical space but also created social spaces of their own. In that connection, we can also observe a shadow of local-global linkage in the city.

Urban Ethnic Space

In the era of globalization, a phenomenon of ethnicity has been dramatically evident in the cities of different countries.



Especially, the urban areas are highly dynamic in nature, comprising with the heterogeneity of population. Spatial concentration of the different communities in the city has an integral part, which reflects the urban way of livelihood. The people have lived individualized life with less interpersonal ties (Cohen, 1974). Still, ethnic communities are highly territorial in an organization and maintain distinctive ways of life. Spatial aspects have been important for the determination of ethnicity. Each of the group has occupied clearly defined areas whether it is in urban or rural in character. Reflections of a cultural difference made the place ethnically significance (Jordan et al., 1986). Each residential area has provided an ethnic essence and helps us to clarify also the nature of socio-cultural changes occurring there. So, here the focus of the study has been concentrated over the Chinese community, those who have unique living space made over different part of the world including India. Chinese community made their imprints over 19 countries spread over Asia, Europe, and America. About 35 Chinatowns have been found over the world; where out of the 16 are concentrated in the continent of Asia. In the Indian context, the Chinese population has been dwindling day by day. The Chinese in India are mainly concentrated in the large urban centers, particularly in Kolkata and Mumbai. A smaller portion of their community also found in Delhi, Madras, Kanpur, Assam etc. But in the case of Assam, there has been found rural Chinese settlement in Tinsukia district. The historical evidence shows that a large amount of Assamese Chinese population resided over Makam Chinna Patti. Most of them were labors of the tea garden and married local Assamese girl (Rakshit, 2018). Now only around 2000 population are found in the Kolkata city (Krishnan, 2013). So, it has been significant to observe that, in a cosmopolitan city how this ethnic community makes an adjustment with having their own niche reflecting unique cultural heritage.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is mainly qualitative. Because the number of the people in the community are not so high and the Chinese community is dominated in a different part of the city, one is in central Kolkata surrounding Bowbazar area another is the eastern part of Kolkata in Tangra. Their landscapes have been observed through empirical field survey as well as focus group discussions, were conducted accordingly. Due to the prominent ethnic labeling, this Chinese community has been studied by the researchers, contribute some important secondary sources of data and literature have also been investigated for the study.

Origin and Spread of Chinese Community in Kolkata

Kolkata is the epitome of modern India and as well as of the world. There are pieces of evidence of multinational population who methodically crowded here from different parts of the world with the inauguration of British rule in India. The Chinese community is not also out of the scenario. China in Central Asia and India in South Asia, these two great neighboring countries have been separated by an insurmountable Himalayan mountain range. Despite this obstruction, some pathfinders of these two ancient nations

came forward to establish a contact long ago through Buddhist religion. Ancient historical evidence indicates that these two countries came close contact through trade and commerce too. In the modern period with other communities, the Chinese community has been part of the multicultural Kolkata since from the second half of the eighteenth century. It was the first china town in South East Asia shortly after the British made their colonial capital in Kolkata. The real birthplace of China town is not in proper Kolkata, it was about 33 kilometers ahead from Kolkata. At that time Warren Hastings arrived in Kolkata to hold the supreme position of administration in Bengal. During his regime, one Chinese trader named *Tong Atchew* landed here. Interestingly the name "*Achipur*" derived from the name of the first known Chinese immigrant Tong Achew who landed near the bank of Hooghly, somewhere near the present Budge-Budge. In 1778, Warren Hastings granted Atchew 650 bighas of land at Budge Budge on an annual rent of Rs 45. Tong Atchew founded there a sugar mill and settlement for the workers. He brought manpower and machinery from China which required for the mill. Thus came into existence the first Chinese settlement at the outskirts of Kolkata in a village named Achipur. But after the death of Achew in 1783, sugar mill had been dissolved along with land and machinery was advertised for auction in the Kolkata gazetteer. The successors of Atchew's sugar mill have been moved to the *Cheenapur*; today's *Tiretti Bazar*, and the community further developed there. In 1910, some portion of the Chinese community was pushed to the fringes of the city, where they established a leather hub for the production of leather goods (Bose, 1934). This place later became popularly known as *Tangra* (also known as *Dhapa*) was conceived and a second Chinatown was born (fig-1). According to the order of Supreme Court in 19th December 1996, all the inner core tanneries have to stop their activity and move to new location at *Bantala*, which is now a renowned Leather complex of Bengal.

Population Dynamics of Chinese Community

As China is a very large country holding large amount population with diverse regional identity and backgrounds. They are also racially unique from the Indian people. They are belonging to the Mongoloid in origin. Chinese people immigrated through different provinces of China. Especially they were coming from the southeastern provinces of China mainly Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Hubei. In the census of 1961 enumeration of Chinese linguistic people in Kolkata were about 8814, including 5097 male and 3717 female. Then they were the 12th largest linguistic group containing 0.03 percent of the population in Kolkata. Aftermath, there was fluctuation occurred in the population of the community. The graph below shows a discontinuous shift of population (Table-1). There are three shift of population transformation like when Atchew arrived with his team for business purpose in 1778, another hiking period of immigration when there was civil war in China and war against Japan (1930), but in 1962 indo-china war made a bad impact on this community and decreased in the population started from that point. Still, it is found that about 2000 Chinese people are at present, settled in



Kolkata (Ali, 1982). The inflow of the Chinese people in India has been stopped very early but still, those who are remaining, most of them are belonging from an older generation.

Forms of Social Interaction of Chinese Community

Historical evidence reveals that cross-border migration is mainly driven by economic reason. When a new community arrived at a new place, their first priority is to earn a livelihood. So the interaction through economic periphery is probably more comfortable zone for an immigrant community to the host community. In the case of the Chinese community, they made the ancestral crafts like carpentry, leather making, dentistry etc as their survival strategy in Kolkata. It is a very important process for an ethnic community to learn the cultural aspects, build an interpersonal relationship, access social position, and status of receiving society. So, every ethnic group tries to regulate integration processes both the preservation of home culture and active participation with the host culture (Basu, 2016). So, there are both ways social processes are generated. Some of them are open and some of them are hidden in the form of psychological barrier. Social processes are the ways in which individuals and groups interact, adjust, readjust and establish relationships and pattern of behavior which are again modified through social interactions. Social Processes and social interaction are inter-related. Interaction refers to the action done in response to the another. When this interaction through repetition leads to a result, is called *social process* (Sen, 2011). A spontaneous social process made a positive or negative impact on society. Some typical interaction processes are exemplified to the historical journey of this community.

The Chinese community has tried to initiate business through of Sugar mill but very soon this business has not grown up to the mark due to the death of Achew. The remaining labourers entered into the sphere of the job market in central Kolkata. They all were expertise in other professional and make a symbolic footprint in the job market. Being a racial minority, their concentration in such occupation as a tannery, shoemaking, laundry works, considered marginal occupation in the Indian context. So as such **competitions** were not observed as per occupational space. But the vacant space occupied by the other community mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is clearly visible from the field visit. On the other hand constant Civil War and War with Japan from the 1930 to 40 periods, the increasingly tough times propelled them from home, drove many thousands of migrants from China to Kolkata. As well as in the time of 1962, Indo-china war all the community people took to the Deoli camp of Rajasthan. Then this Chinese community was regarded as untrustworthy and threat to the national freedom. It was the most **conflictual** situation happened due to their presence in the city. The **accommodation** was most favorable during the British colonial rule. After independence, the situation was more complex. The political tug of war between India and China make them feel uncomfortable. As well as provincial communities like Bihari, Marwari, Muslim from Uttar Pradesh try to occupy their vacant space for the economic purpose. It is the most Pressure burdening situation in the

Central Kolkata area. **Assimilation** with the Chinese community to the city is mainly due to their Chinese cuisine. These Chinese cuisines are very popular in all aspect of our life. On the other hand, the Chinese community learned the local language Bengali as well as Hindi to make themselves more interactive. As well as they make a *Kali temple* in Tangra which make the highest degree of assimilation to the society. In the field of **cooperation**, it is found that the Chinese community with close proximity to Muslim as well as Anglo-Indian population. This may be due to their common food habit and occupational pursuits. So, all the phenomenon made a clear impression over Chinese as an ethnic community and now it has been observed that how the processes made them a comfortable situation to build up a socio-cultural structure.

Social Dimension of the Chinese Community

The Chinese community is highly segmented in their society. They are distinctly Mongoloid and sharply distinguishable from the great bulk of the Indian population. This community is a very much close-knit, isolated and self-sufficient community. So, it would be quite reasonable to expect that the Chinese population in Kolkata may be found reflecting some of the segmental characteristics of their home country. These segmentations are along occupational, religion, language, and cultural lines.

Occupational Structure

The majority of Chinese populations have maintained their social distinction through their occupational specialization. They were able to established unique kinds of an occupational niche in the *city of joy*. These occupational niches became inherently linked with the four sub-ethnic group of Chinese society. Being racial minority they are concentrated in such occupation which was considered as a marginal in the then society. Some of the main occupations of the Chinese in the city are Carpentry, tannery, Shoemaking, laundry, Restaurants. Among the other occupations like making and selling of sauce, paper artwork, piggery, and tailoring etc. *Cantonese* group of people offering their occupational expertise in the sector of carpentry. They mainly belonged from Guangdong provinces of Southern China. Carpentry was one of the main occupations of the Cantonese. They were very much skilled and provide their expertise service in Kolkata as well as south Asian cities. In 1950, there were 300 more than three hundred Cantonese carpenters working on Hooghly dock and more than 20 Cantonese owned factories in Kolkata (Basu, 2016). There are a substantial amount of Chinese carpenters around central Kolkata but now they are outnumbered in the city. Hakka group of people are tannery workers and shoemakers. Hakka people were belonging from the east Guangdong provinces but some of them were from Hunan provinces also. They are greater in numerical strength among the Chinese community in Kolkata now. They are expertise in tannery business mainly shoemaking and also other leather products. At a time this shoemaking business of Chinese was mainly localized in the central district of the city. They were employing their women and children in the industry. This combining effort of making the residential place



as a manufacturing unit and selling outlet, create a lucrative money making industry for them. After that, the leather processing activity has been very much hindrance for environmental point of view in the central part of the city. So Hakka people have made a separate area outskirts of the city near Tangra and make a new journey of tannery business (Xing & Sen, 2013). There are another two group of people belonging to Hubei and Shanghai province of China depicts their occupational activity in a unique way. The native people of Hubeinese are very well known for their expertise in dentistry. There are very few dentists remain today at the central Kolkata region. Another least portion of Shanghai originate people set up laundry and dry cleaning business. That is why one can see many laundry and dry cleaning houses in the center of the city. It is also evident that some people from Shanghai also drove rickshaw in the city at the early period of their existence. But today this profession is not in existence. (Bose, 2013). The economic situation is now very much changed. Before the economic opportunity is limited for them or it can be said that they are very much specialized. But the shifting changes in the generation made them efficient in the other occupational activities. Today, it is seen that they are very much concentrated on the restaurant business, food processing, mainly sauce manufacturing, modern parlors and some of them are related to the information technology sector. The change of the situation made the community more improvised their occupation according to the need of the city.

Religious Belief

The Religious practice of the Chinese community in Kolkata is very unique. Among the significant religious segment, Chinese community subdivided by Buddhist, Christian and a small section of Muslim. The Buddhists are numerically the most dominant followed by the Christians. The believer of Muslim religion has been comparatively very low. Once Chinese Muslim in Kolkata claimed superiority over Chinese Buddhists. More than 300 Muslim Chinese families were reported to have gone Saudi Arabia for settlement. Now less than 30 Muslim Chinese individuals are localized around Phears lane in the Central Kolkata. They observed their religious rituals with the other non-Chinese Muslim. They don't have their secluded religious place. There has been an interesting fact revealed when the history of Chinese religious place was nurtured. The first Chinese immigrants were mostly men and quite naturally they formed their own group usually from the native place of origin or same professional attachment. These social groups were referred to as a *Huiguans* which actually reflects the meaning "meeting place" in English. These were actually social clubs which had provided different social services to their community people. And all the *Huiguans* also have a traditional temple as per their culture. So, basically, these traditional temples are one type of social club, play an active role for their community people for socialized them in the city and pray to their gods (Xing, 2016). China is fairly a large country having the same god with the difference in traditions and worship style. But at present Chinese society is mainly segmented by the religious belief on Buddhism and Christianity. The oldest Chinese temple is

located in the Budge Budge. This temple is a blending of *Confucian* and *Taoist* believes where Buddhist ideas also exist. On the other hand, there are Christian Chinese, following the Catholic and Protestantism as a major belief in Christianity (Roy, 2008). From the field observation, it is found that about 16 religious centers are belonging to the Chinese community. Most of them are concentrated at Tiretti bazaar and Tangra area but some other community temples are situated at Lake Town, Chowbagha and Chandni Chowk. Uniquely observed a Chinese *Kali temple* in Tangra, made a conscious awareness about assimilation with Hindu religious beliefs.

Language

Language is the most important medium of communication, but in the case of the Chinese community it is a beat obsolete from the perspective of a region like Bengali speaking Kolkata. The main dialects spoken by the Chinese in Kolkata are Hakka, Fukien, Cantonese, and Hupei. It has been found that Chinese are divided themselves into distinct categories of Han, Man, Hui, Mong, and Chung. These are mainly based on region or places they came from China. So in that connection, it has been reported that Han group of Chinese in Kolkata are numerically dominant. The dialects they speak are known as Hakka. Another group coming from Canton and Macao district of Guangdong provinces of China speaks in Cantonese. So, most of the dialects were reported to be mutually unintelligible and thus the Chinese of different dialect groups find it difficult to communicate with each other (Ali, 1982). According to the president of Indian Chinese association, at present 65 percent of the Chinese in Kolkata maintaining Hakka as a communicating language and rest of the sizable amount of people depend on Cantonese and least of them are Hubei speaking population. But it is known that Chinese Mandarin is their national language. So Mandarin is getting tremendous importance in their educational institutions and as a media of mass communication in the society. In this context, it is here to know that the Mandarin language is very much popular right now among the Indian (Niyogi, 2015). Because of globalized expansion of business, China made the Mandarin very popular and relevant in the new world order. Many of the Indian in Kolkata also speak Mandarin fluently. Now it is the urgent need for business interaction propaganda to better interact and understand the Chinese clients. But still, it is very interesting that they are very much comfortable in Hindi than native Bengali language. They much preferred to communicate with the native people by Hindi or English and fragmented Bengali, if needed.

Cultural Landscape

The cultural landscape is an artificial landscape made by the cultural groups which reflect their identity on the inhabiting area. Every inhabited area modified from the natural landscape to cultural landscape according to the need and purpose of the cultural groups. Where geographers are especially concerned with settlement pattern, architecture and land use pattern (Jordan et al., 1986). In the same way, the natural landscape of Kolkata have been fashioned by the Chinese Community people; make their own imprint in the



city. Community landscape mainly concentrated over two areas surrounding Tiretti Bazar in the middle and Tangra region lying in the eastern portion of the city. Both the area significantly flourish their settlement pattern on account of social, economic as well as religious purposes. From the historical pieces of evidence, it is found that in the middle of the nineteenth century central Kolkata's Bowbazar region was a full-fledged neighborhood of Chinese community decorated with the temple, residential quarters, schools, business association, graveyards etc. Tiretti Bazar was then the lucrative business hub of authentic china products made by the provincial expertise people. Most likely Cantonese worked on carpenters, Hakka engaged in the shoe business, Shandong and Hubeinese are concentrated on the silk trade and paper works consecutively. After the Indo China War, the flourishing past was degraded thoroughly. Influx of non-Chinese people mainly Muslim population occupied Bowbazar area (Zhang Xing, 2016). For that, the internal integration within the community was very much loose and degrading the feature of the oldest China town in the country. Nowadays the obscure landscape of Chinese community observed close proximity to the Tiretti Bazar (Fig.2). In the oldest region of original China town, most prevent feature is their religious temple and churches. All the small cross-cutting lanes stand with majestic Chinese architecture like Chattawala lane (Sea Ip Church), Blackburn lane (Toong On Church, Gee Hing Church, Sea Voi Church, Choonghee Dong Thien Haue.) Damzen lane (Nam soon Church), Hide Lane (Ling Liang Chinese Church) all are carrying the faded history of the Chinese settlement. All religious institutions of the Chinese community in Kolkata reflected their community represents from the original Chinese provinces. On the other hand, it is very much noticeable that different other commercial multi-storied buildings and houses encroach their residential areas. That's why their beautification of their settlement is suppressed by these commercial Jungles. Another important activity is arranged rows of daily morning breakfast markets in Chattawala lane with their popular cuisine which is very much popular among the nation Chinese population of Kolkata. Some distinct food processing shops relating to their cuisine are noticed in that area. Likely different kind of sauces, flavored tea and different types of seafood etc are sold there. Pou Chong and Sing Cheung are popular private shop among the area. Not only Chinese but other restaurant owners also visited their shops for marketing. A few restaurants are in the core of Tiretti Bazar like Pou Hing, Tung Nam etc are very much timidly operated because of occasional arrival of a customer. In this context, if we put a focus on the residential areas of the community, some well-off family move away from the Tiretti Bazar area but still some family adjusted in Bowbazar area, Chattawala Gully as well as Chadnichowk area. They are still trying to maintain their Chinese lifestyle and adjusted over generations in the same small old apartments with all family members.

On the other hand, the new establishment was initiated because of mainly occupational specialization of Hakka Chinese community situated on the eastern periphery of Kolkata called Tangra, popularly known as *Dhapa* (Fig-3).

This Hakka Community is specialized in shoemaking. After immigrating from China they found that leather business is lucrative in the Indian situation. In India, leather workers are known as *Chammar* and according to Bengali, they are untouchable caste (Liang, 2007). So, then it was an incompetent market for them. After the Second World War, the market of the leather industry was very prosperous because of high demand on export quality products. About 300 hundred tanning businesses and five to fifty workers in each factory were engaged in that time for production purposes. Housed in large concrete buildings of two and three stories, or small one-story structures with tile roofs, these factories are connected by a maze of unpaved, frequently muddy paths as well as open sewers through which the by-products of the tanning process flow (Oxfeld, 2007). At that moment the business was more profit gaining but aftermath 1980 the business had declined due lack of innovative measures for the betterment of the industry and the of late local government forced to shift their business in Bantala because of environmental degradation and pollution problems. Now the situation is totally changed there, the unique tanneries cum residence pattern is overturned now as a restaurants cum residence. Most of the tannery owners leave India and those who are now linked with this land made it as a restaurant for survival. There are more than 20 restaurants operating in the china town, very few are in big size like Beijing, Big Boss, Nanking and most of the restaurants are small and medium in size. But still, there are some signs of illegal tanning business in Tangra. Some finished product leather factories are also available there. Most of the area is now concretized, marshy land is now almost invisible. Temple and churches of the Tangra mostly dedicated to the god related to the Hakka community especially. So both the landscape of Tiretti Bazar and Tangra relating to the Chinese community are quite different mainly because of their economic activity.

Conclusions

The Population of the Chinese community is very much low in South Asian countries, but still, the largest amount is found in Kolkata. The popularly coined term "*Chinatown*" has been used to describe an urban area in any country, other than China where several numbers of Chinese people segregated resided. The Chinese community is one of the prominent ethnic groups living in the quarter of the Kolkata city, which is a microcosm of multi-ethnic society. Until the British periods, the situation for the global community has been very comfortable but after the independence, the situation changes remarkably. The Chinese community has a long history of existence about 220 years. Continuously diminishing their population exerts a remarkable impact on the cityscape. They have segregated over two prominent pockets of Kolkata likely Tiretti Bazar area in central Kolkata and eastern part of Kolkata popularly known as Tangra or Dhapa. Spatial economic niche made them a unique community in the city. Exclusive expertise in the occupational sector has created their own identity and money. Still, Hakka clan of Chinese community has been much more secluded from the host society because of their tannery related business. As per the Hindu dominated society, this business labeled them quite untouchable at the then time of earlier



Kolkata. But still they make good economic benefit from this tannery business and most of them left apart from the city for better fortune. Sometimes their distinct social visibility, language, colour acting as a barrier of adjustment in the local situation. The special physiognomic character is more prominent hindrance for social interaction of China originated people but the situation has more intolerant when the question of nationality is more prior to the people. Indo-China war made the community very much distressed and introvert. So their mutual avoidance, rather than reciprocal tolerance, best describe their relations with the dominant community. Right now very few original Chinese people are living Kolkata. They are visible only community gathering likes Dragon Boat Festival; Chinese New Year etc. But the social situation is not so rigid now. Modern people of Kolkata are highly rejoiced to have their food items and which also a doorway to win the heart of people. So Food is the most important items which are overwhelmingly accepted by the people of Kolkata. But still, there has been a tendency to leave this country by their younger generations. The interactional space between the communities has been mainly based on economic parameter but not in the social parameter. So they are very much unhindered as a community by the host society. Like this way in the near future, a great possibility of the Chinese community would have been disappeared from the city left their enormous prominent landscape. In West Bengal, minority commission tries to rejuvenate the society by promoting their cultural traits.

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Fig. 1: Location of the Study Area

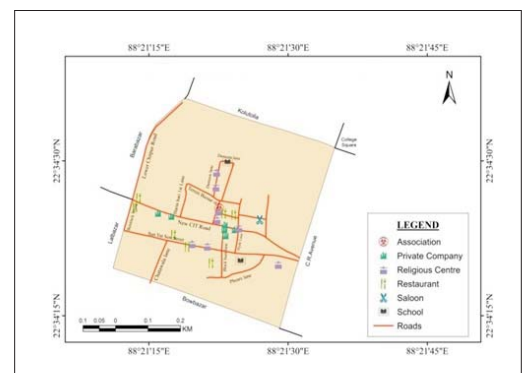


Fig. 2: The Chinese Landscape in Turret Bazar

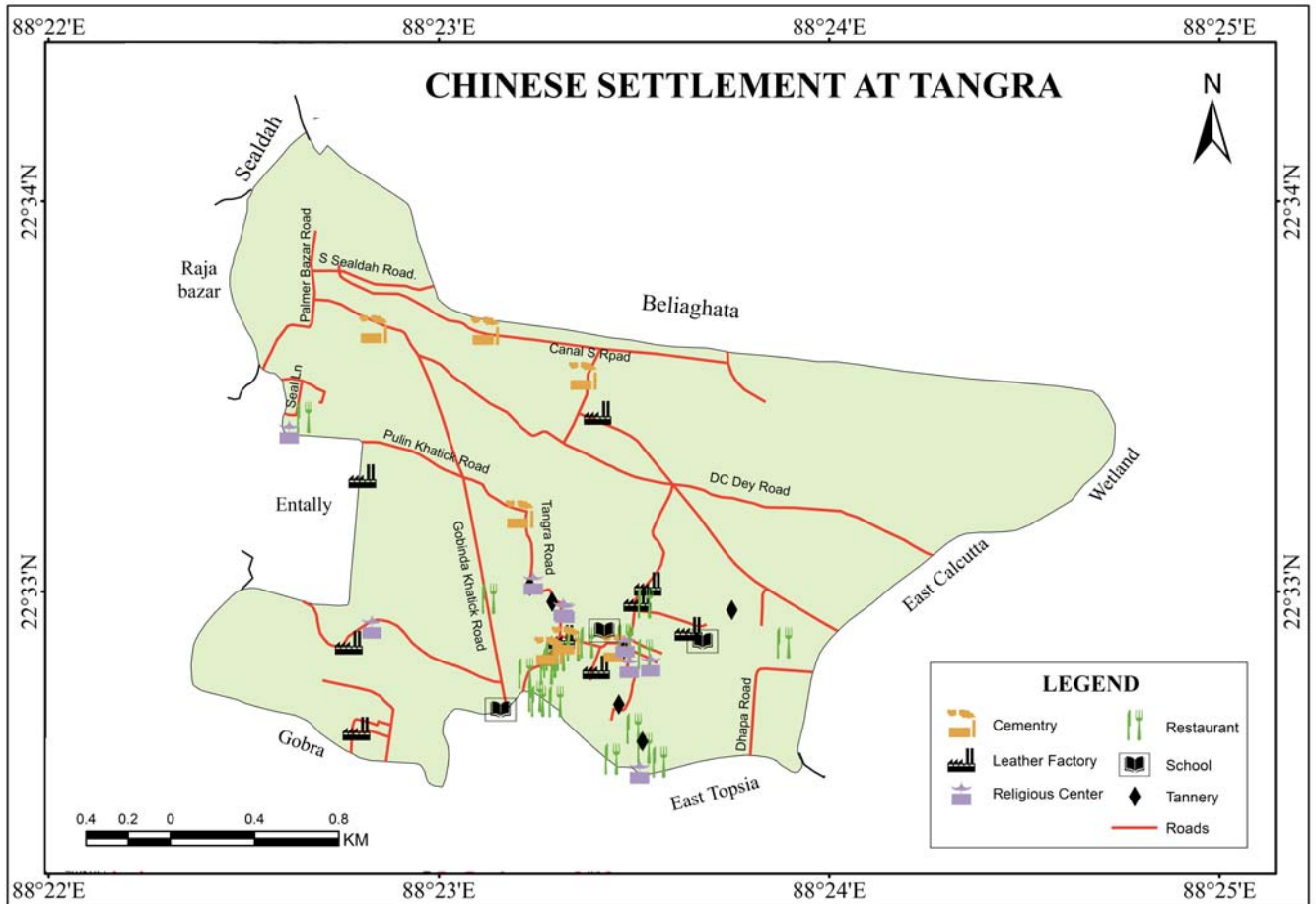


Fig. 3: The Chinese landscape in Tangra

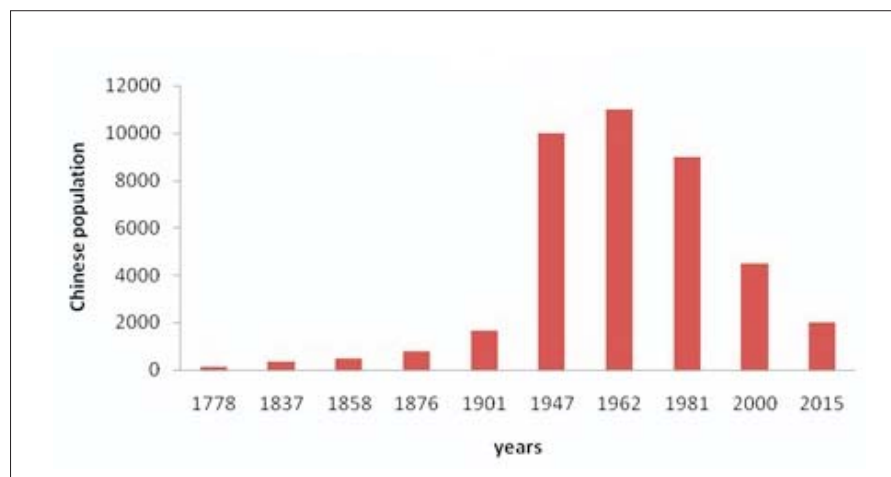


Fig. 4: Trend of Growth of Chinese Population in Kolkata



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