



Beyond Chinatowns: Neighbourhood, Space and Identity for the Calcutta Chinese

Speaker: Dr. Jayani Bonnerjee

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Among the wider Chinese diaspora, which settled in the Indian sub-continent during colonial times, Calcutta Chinese community is an important part as the city has developed a close-knit 'community' structure through its networks of associations, schools and places of worship. This sense of community plays such an important role in the life of diasporic Chinese, even after they migrated to other places, like Toronto, they feel an emotional attachment to the Chinese neighbourhood in Calcutta. The focus of the speaker in this presentation was how neighbourhood spaces in the city influenced the Calcutta Chinese identity. While discussing the sense of belonging in the city that cut across community boundaries the speaker brought out another diasporic community in Calcutta, the Anglo Indians. She went beyond the ethno-geographic and community narratives and attempted to bring out the specific role Calcutta played in their lives. The speaker looked at the inter-community connection between different minority groups (mainly Chinese and Anglo-Indian) through the theoretical framework of "Cosmopolitanism".

The speaker began her presentation with a brief explanation of her theoretical approach. There were two aspects of cosmopolitanism, one was the global political aspect and the other was cosmopolitanism and city, which more particularly referred to diverse communities within the contemporary city. The speaker, however, mentioned that in case of India and other south Asian cities, the idea of cosmopolitanism was somewhat different, which Asish Nandy had termed as "alternative cosmopolitanism". In this kind of alternative cosmopolitan cities, the community members held their secret selves and these secret selves created boundaries between communities. In Calcutta, the Chinese and Anglo-Indian community exemplified these aspects of cosmopolitanism.

In the first part of her presentation, the speaker talked about Chinese Community in Calcutta. Chinese communities in Calcutta mainly lived in two China Towns - China Town or older China Town of Central Calcutta and China Town of Tangra. Tangra was outside the Calcutta municipality area. The speaker mentioned that immigration had been a major issue for Chinese Community in Calcutta. While the immigration process started in the central Calcutta China Town in 1962 with the Sino-Indian border war, the immigration process started in Tangra mainly in 1990's, after Indian government policy of 1992. This policy forced the Tangra Chinese to shut down their leather industries, which was their main living occupation. These immigrant Chinese communities mainly settled down in Toronto and Canada. While discussing about the Chinese communities in Calcutta the speaker brings out two images of China Town from the existing literature. In the early China Towns,

there was intermingling between various Chinese sub-groups such as Hakka Chinese and Cantonese Chinese and with other communities such as Hindustanis and Euro-Indians. However, as she mentions in the later period a stereotypical image of China Town is brought into light by many writers.

The speaker then proceeded to narrate the notion of 'para' within the Chinese and Anglo-Indian Community. The term para invoked the sense of community, which cut across ethno-geographic and class lines. The speaker used the word 'para' as a space for everyday interaction to analyse the changing nature of Anglo-Indians and Chinese neighbourhood in Calcutta. Drawn on the narrative of "mundane cosmopolitanism" the speaker attempted to explore how both the communities relate with the space. She mentioned that there were two broad senses of 'para', one is cognition of the area of the city and the other is territorial belongingness. In the case of Chinese communities and Anglo-Indians along with the territorial belongingness, the idea of 'para' is also constructed with the community line. The speaker here brings out how the geographical location where Chinese communities' dwelled came to be known as "China Para" and the Anglo-Indian dwellings were known as "Saheb Para". These minority communities were so embedded in the areas that their presence in Calcutta was often seen through these areas or paras. The speaker interestingly presented a community narrative within the Chinese communities and Anglo-Indian communities in Calcutta. She explained the socio-economic and cultural differences between the two 'China Paras' of central Calcutta and Tangra. The Chinese community in Tangra are more homogenous than central Calcutta, as the Chinese community there live a more cosmopolitan life. With regard to the Anglo-Indian community, the speaker said that the residence of "Elliot Road" carried more Anglo-Indianness compared to other 'paras' in Calcutta.

In the next section, the speaker presented an overview of idea of cosmopolitanism and mundane cosmopolitanism in the life of Chinese communities in Calcutta. While doing so she highlighted Asef Bayat's notion of "everyday cosmopolitanism", where the self transits itself to associate with agonistic others in everyday life. She also brought Yasmeen Arif's definition of mundane cosmopolitanism, according to which sense of community goes beyond the strict sense of the term when people live in close proximity. These definitions do not actually include the Tangra Chinese community as the speaker in her research found them to be a close community. However, the "China Para" in central Calcutta resembled with Bayat's and Arif's notion of cosmopolitanism. The speaker found the depiction of non-Chinese among the central Calcutta China Para's Chinese community went beyond the community narrative and gave us a narrative of locality. This narrative of locality included non-Chinese neighbours along with Chinese community members. The speaker explained that the good socio economic condition were one of the reasons for the openness in central Calcutta's China Para. She interestingly pointed that food was a connection between Chinese community in Calcutta with the Anglo-Indians and other communities of Calcutta.

The speaker then went on to describe the connection between Chinese communities and Anglo-Indian communities in Calcutta. Apart from food, she found that their minority identity within Calcutta brings them closer and this ultimately leads to the formation of a new community known as "Changlo-Indians" (a term used by Daniel Lee). The speaker argued that inter-marriage between the two communities became more common in recent years. Here too there was a difference between Central Calcutta China Para and Tangra China Town. She mentioned Tangra as more conservative with regard to marriage with other communities. In the last section, she talked about a narrative of loss in everyday cosmopolitanism of Calcutta. The speaker opined the sense of cosmopolitanism of Calcutta had disappeared over time. She also argued that this kind of de-cosmopolitanism was not new in colonial cities; city of Bombay was a clear example of

this. Finally, she described Calcutta as harbinger of memory among the immigrants Chinese and Anglo-Indian Communities of Calcutta.

One participant commented that, the speaker should be more specific while talking about cosmopolitanism of para, as there was a difference between urban para and village para. The speaker in response said that she used the cosmopolitanism of para in urban sense. As an answer to a question about the view of elite of Calcutta towards the Chinese communities, the speaker highlighted the stereotypical position of Bengali elites towards the Chinese communities.

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