



**Beyond Barbed Wires: A Distant Dawn 2015 - A documentary by Rafeeq Ellias**

**Speakers: Michael Cheng, Joy Ma, Yin Marsh, and Steven Wan, Deoli Survivors**

**Chair: Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Fellow, ICS**

**7 October, 2015**

**Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi**

Rafeeq Ellias in his documentary, “Beyond Barbed Wires”, a namesake of a documentary made by Steven Rosen in 1997 on the American-Japanese Internees in the U.S, imprisoned post Pearl Harbour, highlighted the story of the Indian Chinese who were imprisoned in an internment camp in Deoli, Rajasthan in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

The documentary took the audience to North America, where a majority of Indian-Chinese chose to immigrate after their release from the internment camp. From behind the lens, Ellias tried to trace the experiences and narratives of the prisoners and their families. Shortly after the War, the Indian government had imprisoned over 3000 Indian-Chinese men, women and children from the border areas of Assam and Bengal without trial, and placed them at Deoli, Rajasthan, a Second World War POW camp, used as an Intern Camp in the aftermath of the 1962 War. The documentary utilized interviews with the last generation of survivors from the camp, to tell the stories of loss, displacement and identity.

The documentary informed that the roots of the Chinese community in India can be traced back to a few centuries. While the first wave of Chinese settlers seemed to have come in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a part of economic migration, the second wave came as a result of turmoil, and many chose to stay back after the 1949 Communist revolution. Majority of Chinese settlements in India were concentrated around the Eastern part of India, Assam and Bengal. During the time of Sino-Indian War, India was home to over 300,000 Indian-Chinese. Today the figure has dropped to 2,000.

Moving further, the internees being interviewed in the documentary divulged that in the months leading up to the 1962 war, tensions had started building among the Chinese community in India, exemplified in the fear of the “knock” on the door, and being displaced from your home overnight. While the ordeal of 1962 war went on only for a month, internees were imprisoned from a period ranging from a few months to almost four years. Afterwards, the internees were left to fend for themselves, while some were sent back to China, during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, a place they had never known. Others were left to rebuild their lives from scratch.

In the final part of the documentary, the internees expressed their continuing struggle in coping with the tragic memories. The speakers informed that majority of the internees continue to face alienation from other members of the community, as well as members from outside the community, some suspected them of treason, and others chose to stay away out of fear. The hardship of the incident was followed by a deafening silence, and the reality of being stateless, despite having built their lives and memories in this country. In sum, their story tries to break away from the forced exile of their past, and unravels the untold narrative of, not just the Indian-Chinese community, but of Modern India itself.

## **Discussion**

The discussion panel consisted of Rafeeq Ellias, the filmmaker, whose 2003 BBC documentary “The Legend of Fat Mama” first brought the Indian-Chinese Community to the spotlight. The documentary “Beyond the Barbed Wires: A Distant Dawn,” is an extension of his involvement with the community, and his own personal experience of having lost his Indian-Chinese classmates, who had stopped coming to school during the war period.

The filmmaker was accompanied by Yin Marsh, Joy Ma, who were interns at the Deoli camp, and were part of the documentary, along with Steven Wang and Michael Chang, who were also interns at the camp. The panellist started the discussion by narrating their personal ordeals and experiences. Their stories had a similar theme of abandonment, loss and floating identities of being Indian-Chinese.

The ensuing discussion brought out the issue of there being no records of the internees at the camp, though one must point out, that since the issue comes under the 1962 war, and it being a sensitive issue, majority of documents related to it, are still not de-classified. Another important concern raised during the discussion related to the issue of Registration Certificate among the Indian-Chinese community still living in India, and denial of citizenship to them. In the end it was stressed that the documentary is not just a telling of the past, but also about the hope of being acknowledged by the Indian state and thereby bringing an end to their long-standing suffering.

*Report prepared by Shilpa Sharma, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

## **About the Speakers**

**Michael Cheng** was six years old when he was interned. He lives in Charlotte, North Carolina with his family.

**Joy Ma** is a writer and attended Delhi University. She was born in Deoli and is working on a book about her family’s journey in India.

**Yin Marsh** was 13 when she went to Deoli, She wrote *Doing Time with Nehru* and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Steven Wan** was a teenager when he was interned with his family. He lives in Toronto with his family

**Rafeeq Ellias** is a photographer and filmmaker with over 30 awards to his credit, including an Emmy for a series of UNICEF TV commercials as well as two National Awards for his BBC-documentary, *The Legend of Fat Mama*, the story of India's tiny Chinese community in Kolkata.

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