

## ROLE OF INDIAN CHINESE DIASPORA IN INDIA CHINA RELATIONS

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**Abstract:** India and China are two Asian giants that have embarked on the continuous journey of globalisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on their strengths of ancient civilizational heritage, population, culture, economy, and international political clout. In this journey, diasporas have played a significant role as soft power and has potential to play greater roles in future. Therefore, keeping in view the significance of the diasporas, the paper explores the dynamics of India China relations and the role of Indian Chinese diaspora in it. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part attempts to explore the historical, cultural, economic and political relations and interactions between the two. Secondly, it attempts to trace the history and trajectories of Chinese diaspora in India which is two centuries old. Moreover, it highlights the issues of social, cultural, political and economic interaction with host society along with formation of a distinct Indian Chinese identity. Lastly, it attempts to analyse the role of Chinese diaspora in diplomatic relations between India and China. The diasporas are the cultural ambassadors as soft power which can transcend the hard power and play a significant role through people to people interactions.

**Keywords:** Indian Chinese Diaspora, Indian Diaspora, Chinese Diaspora in India, Chinese diasporic culture, India China relations, Soft power

### INTRODUCTION

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is considered to be the era of rise of Asia in the international geopolitics. India and China are two major players in the emergence of Asia as the fastest growing economies, regional powers and are home to one third of the world population. Demographically, both have a large pool of labour in the working age group. Moreover, economically they have the potential to dominate in both industry and services. Both are ancient civilisations and neighbours with long shared history and cultural exchanges. However, both countries have their significant strengths and weaknesses, which they can work out to balance in order to emerge as global players. Therefore, the article attempts to understand the significance of Chinese diaspora in India and is divided into three sections. Initially, the article explores the historical, cultural, economic and political relations and interactions between the two countries. The second section traces the two centuries old history and trajectories of Chinese diaspora in India. Moreover, it highlights the issues of social, cultural, political and economic interaction with host society along with the formation of a distinct Indian Chinese identity. The last section analyses the role of Chinese diaspora in diplomatic relations between India and China. It explores how they play significant roles as soft power that can transcend the hard power and play a

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significant role through people to people interactions.

### INDIA AND CHINA RELATIONS

The shared history of India and China goes back to the last two millennia wherein India was an important part of the historical silk route running across Asia from China to Turkey (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). Traders and travellers from both sides were considerably present and visible at important trading centres and cities (Vasan, 2006). The second most perceptible contact was Buddhism which began with king Ashoka of Maurya dynasty who sent his son and daughter as religious emissaries to south-east Asia (Kumar, 2019). Thereafter, there was a series of eminent monks who visited China to spread Buddhism. The impact of Buddhism had been perceptible and long lasting, as presently, a significant Chinese population practice Buddhism. The spread of Buddhism has been wider in south-east Asian countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, China and so on (Kumar, 2019). Over the course of history, Buddhism has diversified into various strands with distinct practices and local flavours. India being the home of Buddhism has attracted several religious emissaries, philosophers, pilgrims and scholars to visit the sacred sites, learn the practices, translate the scriptures and travellers for tourism. Many of these visitors have stayed in India for long durations and have written extensively about both the cultures.

The culture has become a significant area for cooperation between India and China relations in the last few decades (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). As culture can transcend the constraints of state relations and emphasise on people to people relations. This is essentially part of soft power used significantly in international relations. Therefore, culture and people especially the diasporas become significant part in the policy agendas of bilateral relations. Thus, there has been efforts by the two to revisit, relive and reemphasise their shared cultural experience in order to reinvigorate the cultural ties and build popular consciousness about their common cultural heritage. The focus is on understanding the mobility of people/ ideas/ objects, nature and their patterns of interaction and incorporation. Therefore, the understanding of this collective experience will help us to appreciate and realise the opportunities of embarking on the shared journey in the contemporary global era.

The interactions between India and China during the colonial period entered into wider and complicated phase (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). The earlier relations of trade continued in new conditions, simultaneously new relations were established because of nationalism and anti-imperialism. Imperialism, mercantile capitalism and technological advancements paved way for forging closer relations between India and China in certain areas, and tensions also due to some political developments. The longstanding relationship between the two ancient countries and civilisations of the world were influenced by colonialism and imperialist expansion in numerous ways. Simultaneously, political activists, authors, intelligentsia, media and artists in

both countries endeavoured to rediscover each other in modern conditions during this period.

The maritime trade between India and China flourished due to the beginning of trade of tea between China and European countries (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). The emerging port of Bombay and Guangzhou (Canton) became the centres of trade for raw cotton and opium between India and China respectively. Both Indian and Western traders along with British East India Company were the main traders involved in direct trade. Whereas, the colonial expansion by the British in China using the Indian soldiers led to strains between the two.

India was liberated from British colonialism on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 and People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1949 and both established diplomatic relations in 1950 (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). The first PM of India Jawaharlal Nehru and Chairman of PRC Mao Zedong had positive attitudes towards India-China friendship. The relations between India and China subsequently have seen the highs and lows. Presently, there is increased interaction between the two in many spheres. The bilateral diplomatic engagement between India and China were stepped up in the mid-1950s with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence also termed as Panchsheel to establish peaceful relationship (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). This paved way for signing of Agreement on trade and intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India in 1954. Thereafter, steady diplomatic, educational, scientific-technical and cultural exchanges between the two have continued since 1950s. Even Indian films and actors like Raj Kapoor were familiar and popular in China.

The bonhomie of the 1950s was scarred by two major episodes (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). First, the arrival of Dalai Lama with his followers from Tibet to India as refugees in 1959. China was irked by the acceptance of Tibetan refugees by India. Secondly, the souring of the relations heightened the mutual suspicion which finally culminated in the Indo-China war in 1962. Moreover, the ensuing border disputes of Akshai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh and others continue to mar the relations despite several talks between the two. Since then, both the countries have their own political, economic and social trajectories.

Although, few attempts of goodwill and informal exchanges were made in the 1970s to revive the contacts, it remained limited and constrained (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). The direct trade between the two countries was resumed in 1977 after the agreements were signed to enhance trade and commerce. One of the most significant steps towards normalisation of relations between the two was the visit of Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988. It marks the rejuvenation of high-level interactions and relations. They signed Agreements on trade and commerce, science and technology, and cultural exchange and cooperation. Thereafter, the visits and cooperative exchanges by the top leaders of both countries increased in numbers and broadened in scope. The two countries have signed many agreements to

increase cooperation in various domains including the settlement of border dispute.

There has been spectacular increase in economic and commercial interaction between China and India in recent times (Sooriyan, 2018). But, the total trade volume between the two remained below US\$ 3 billion until 2000. However, this number increases rapidly in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and reached over US\$ 60 billion by 2010. Thus, China became India's largest trading partner and India became China's seventh largest export destination by 2010. This is the new beginning in India and China relations in modern times which is more inclined towards economic pragmatism. The major exports from India consists of raw materials like iron ores, cotton, yarn, gems, etc. while China mostly exports boilers, electrical machinery, electronic products, iron and steel, industrial products and so on. However, at present the balance of trade is in favour of China. Many Indian companies have entered into China with huge investments and establishment of their ventures in China in sectors ranging from software, IT solutions, drugs, industrial products and so on (Zhu, 2007). Some of the prominent names include companies like Reliance, TCS, Infosys, Wipro, Dr Reddy's, Mahindra & Mahindra and so on. At least 10 Indian banks have also established their branches in China. Reciprocally, Chinese companies have also set up their base in India which includes Huawei Technologies, ZTE, Haier, Sinosteel, Sino Hydro Corporation, Baoshan Iron & Steel Ltd. and so on.

Along with the growth of economic ties between the two countries, the number of Indians and Chinese visiting each other's countries, and also living and working there has also grown considerably. Apart from Hong Kong, currently there are over 20,000 Indians living in China and the number continues to grow (Pan, 2014). They are predominantly students (over 8,000), traders and businessmen and professionals spread across many provinces of China. Tens of thousands of Chinese have also visited India over the last decade. Many come to visit the places of Buddhist pilgrimage in India. In addition, a growing number of Chinese are working as software professionals, chartered accountants and entrepreneurs in India. The development of people-to-people contacts has reached to levels unprecedented in India-China relations although the number is still small given the size of China and India and their populations.

There is significant rise in the cultural exchanges between India and China (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). Several cultural festivals of both India and China have been organised in each other's countries. The Cultural Exchange Programme launched in 2010 has started various activities including exchanges of authors, archaeologists, archivists, youth delegations, sports, media, dancers, singers, musicians and others. Additionally, film festivals and other cultural festivals are also organised. The academic exchanges between scholars has also increased progressively covering diverse branches of knowledge. Along with this, there are other cultural exchanges through people and media also. There are other cultural elements which are gaining

popularity like Indian Yoga, food, fashion and films in China, whereas, Chinese food, Chinese language courses, martial arts and Chinese medicine in India.

Finally, in 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is increasing collaboration between India and China at regional and global forums. The Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity established in 2005 fosters the relations from a larger global strategic perspective rather than bilateral perspective (Sooriyan, 2018). Moreover, both are partners and collaborators in ASEAN, BRICS and other regional international forums. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is another initiative by China which has a huge potential for the region, but India has been sceptical of the ambitions of rising China. However, there is greater cooperation and coordination between India and China on issues concerning international trade, regional security, maritime security, environmental problems and so on. The growing economic strength of China and India has increased their sense of responsibility in international affairs and global interest in their relationship.

### **CHINESE DIASPORA IN INDIA**

Historically, there has been movement of people between India and China as explorers, travellers, religious monks emisan is, and traders. The ancient silk route was an important road for the mobility of goods, people and cultures (Vasan, 2006). Interestingly, few of them settled and assimilated at different trading centres. The development of the overland and maritime trade between the two resulted in the arrival of Indians and Chinese traders who settled in the other's country. There is evidence of Punjabi, Kashmiri and Shikarpuri traders who were found in the main towns of southern Xinjiang (Vasan, 2006).

During the British colonialism the maritime trade with China was revived which led groups of Indian merchants to arrive and settle on the Chinese coast. Initially, it mostly comprised of Parsi and Baghdadi Jewish from Bombay and Muslim Bohra and Ismaili traders from Gujarat (Mitra & Keqiao, 2014). The First Opium War between British and China and the opening of treaty ports thereafter saw the emergence of Hong Kong as a major trading port. A significant number of Indians made it their home temporarily or permanently. The business interests diversified from the import-export trade to manufacturing, real estate, banking and share brokerage. The Marwari and Sindhi communities also arrived in Hong Kong and China's port cities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another group consisted of policemen and watchmen from Punjab who mostly settled in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin initially and some dispersed to smaller towns as well.

At the same time, these commercial relations also initiated the arrival of Chinese in India. They settled mostly in and around Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), though due to their numerical strength they were able to establish a Chinese settlement only at Calcutta. According to historical and social records the

first Chinese to settle in Calcutta was Yang Dazhao (Atchew) who was granted land on lease from Warren Hastings (Governor General of British India) in 18<sup>th</sup> century (Liang, 2007). He set up a sugar mill on the land and thereafter, brought more Chinese labourers to work in the mill during the 19<sup>th</sup> century who established Chinese settlement in the Bowbazar and Tangra areas of Calcutta. They specialised in their traditional occupations and expertise of carpentry and shipbuilding and later in the tannery as well. Few of them also worked in the tea plantations of India's north-eastern province of Assam who were skilled in tea cultivation and processing and were instrumental in developing an extensive tea industry in India. Moreover, Chinese soldiers also came to Assam at Indian Burma border during WWII and few of them never went back and chose India as place of their residence. The turbulent conditions in China during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, led to the arrival of larger numbers of Chinese in India including women and children turning the immigrants into well settled community. Though, India China War of 1962 created hardships, suspicion of Chinese in India increased their difficulties which led to a large number emigrating back to China or western countries, thus dwindling their population in India.

The Indian Chinese have been neglected because they are on the margins in comparison to the 'grand currents' of the Chinese Diaspora at other destinations (Berjeaut: 1999: 6). The rapid development of trade and commerce with Britain after 1780s marks the beginning of mass Chinese emigration (Kuhn: 2008: 12). The number of Chinese immigrants living in South Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia are in millions, whereas their population in Kolkata just reached maximum 20,000 during the 1960s and dwindled after the Indo-China war in 1962 (Lee: 2003: 5). Secondly, India's population is more than one billion people in which a very small number of Chinese in India is insignificant and are economically and politically on the margins (Pan, 2014).

Jennifer Liang (Liang, 2007) in the article 'Migration Patterns and Occupational Specialisations of Kolkata Chinese: An Insider's History' argues the migration of the Chinese to India took place in three distinct phases: first nineteenth century migration constituted skilled workers from China seeking better employment opportunities; second early twentieth century, Chinese refugees migrated to Kolkata due to social unrest and Japanese invasion; and, in the post-1945 period, third wave of Chinese immigrants came due to civil war between the Guomindang and the Communists.

The first wave of immigrants that came to Kolkata in the nineteenth century consisted of traders and skilled workers. The earliest Chinese immigrants were Cantonese carpenters who contracted for every kind of carpentry work at the Hooghly dock until the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict (Liang: 2007: 398–9, 405). Mostly, they cooperated with the colonial system and had better relationship with the British than the local Indians. The British were distrustful of locals and probably found

it easier to employ the Chinese who were considered hard-working, easy to deal with and equipped with superior skills and perceived to be honest and willing to please (Liang, 2007). Thus, there was a reciprocal relationship between the British officials and the Chinese community (Pan, 2014). Amicable relationship with the British ensured that the members of the first Chinese immigrants were able to make a good living for themselves in India. In fact, the Chinese seemed to look towards the British, and not the local Indians, as their main benefactors.

The second wave of Chinese migrants to India began with the collapse of the imperial Manchu government and the establishment of a republic in early twentieth century. The political turmoil due to conflict between the landlords and farmers and civil war between the Communists and the Guomindang, wrecked further havoc in the countryside leading to the emigration of Chinese outside China. Most of them migrated to south-east Asian countries, while few reached India looking for better opportunities. Subsequently, Japanese invasion of China and occupation of Manchuria in 1931 also led many Chinese to seek refuge in India (Liang, 2007). According to the India and China Welfare Cooperative Association Report, the population of Chinese in India increased steadily from 8300 in 1931, to 14,000 in 1936, and to 20,000 in 1946 (Committee for Overseas Chinese, 1962: 37).

This wave of Chinese immigration to India was different from earlier in two ways. Firstly, it consisted mostly women and children and secondly, it consisted of mostly unskilled workers. They encountered numerous difficulties in Kolkata as the existing settlements were not suitable for family members. Despite the hardships, they continued to stay and carved out a livelihood in Kolkata as conditions were worse in homeland. Since, most of them were unskilled workers the situation became more difficult. They were ready to 'take on anything', 'and survive on the goodwill and good office of friends and the community' (Liang, 2007). *Huiguan*, the Chinese social association helped them to settle and find employment in the city. Due to their hard work, honesty and a sense responsibility towards their work they were able to survive these tough times (Liang, 2007).

The third wave began after the World War II when the civil war broke out between the Communists and the Guomindang in 1946 which culminated in the establishment of a Communist government in China (Liang, 2007). Thus, due to uncertainty about China's political future permanent settlements of the Chinese in Kolkata started emerging. Some tried to unite with their families in China by bringing them to India and others who could not, married local Nepali, Assamese or tribal women 'from the hills' due to paucity of women in the community. They mostly preferred local women with Mongoloid features. The Cantonese carpenters married girls of mixed parentage, while Hakkas, tried to maintain their 'pure blood line'. Even today, there are instances of the Kolkata Hakkas returning to the Mei County in China to look for suitable brides. Thus, Chinese immigrants, entered the phase of becoming a family-oriented community from male sojourners. Simultaneously,

the divisions based on distinct linguistic, ethnic and political leanings within the community became sharper and concrete. (Liang, 2007).

### *Occupational and Spatial distribution*

Initially, the Chinese immigrants in Kolkata created niches in four major occupations: carpentry, shoemaking, tannery and dentistry by distinct communities. Later as their number grew in mid-twentieth century, they diversified into new businesses, such as laundry, restaurants and beauty parlours. The occupational specialisations of the Indian Chinese were divided based on their ethnic and regional origins (Liang, 2007). The Cantonese, Hakka and Hubei communities had specific skills which they used in professions. Some professions like tannery and shoemaking were considered only fit for the untouchables in India. Mostly, they were engaged in skill-based work that have either been inherited from previous generations or learned under apprenticeship of older Chinese residents. Most of the Chinese immigrants with their skills and craft were able to emerge out of their poverty and transformed themselves from refugees to residents of Kolkata. Presently, those who are in Kolkata are financially comfortable and manage to fulfil their basic needs (Liang, 2007).

Mei-Lin Pan (2014) argues that, the relationship of Chinese community with host society and authorities, first British and then Indian, has changed in different stages with diverse forms in last two centuries. She examines the lives, traditions and attitudes of the Chinese community to understand its development and its changing character. Furthermore, Pan argues that it is misleading to present this community as one that has always been marginalised and discriminated against in India. Rather, she examines the applicability of concepts such as 'sojourning', 'corridors' and 'middleman minority' to the community and its different sub-groups, both in British India and in independent India.

The Chinese in India consist of three sub-ethnic groups, and each is associated with a different Chinese dialect and occupational specialties (Pan, 2009). The Hakka specialised in shoemaking and tanning; the Cantonese engaged in carpentry and ship building; and the Hubeinese, were largely dentists. Cantonese were relatively large in number and prosperous, but they mostly emigrated to other countries after India China conflict in 1962 due to security reasons. Presently, among the three Chinese sub-groups, Hakkas are predominant in number. Most of them are settled in Tangra (also known as Dhapa), a swampy area on the eastern periphery of the Kolkata since 1910. They started tanning as an adjunct to the business of shoemaking which later took precedence. Chinese found it lucrative since tanning in India was done only by untouchables or Muslims due its polluting nature. Indeed, Kolkata became one of the three major centres of the tanning industry in India due to tanning by the Hakka Chinese. There were around 300 Chinese tanneries in Kolkata in the mid-1980s which dwindled later due to stringent environmental regulations. Thus, many switched to the restaurant business, making Tangra famous for its popular



Chinese restaurants and now it has become a unique 'Chinatown' attracting Indian tourists and visitors (Pan, 2009, 2011). The special residential pattern and the social marginality of the community throw light on the spatial relations and social interaction of Chinese in Kolkata as an ethnic minority (Pan, 2014).

Sen (2009) argues that there are only few Chinese families settled in northern towns of Siliguri and Kalimpong in West Bengal. The Chinese have largely been a literate community but very few of them continued after school education. The reasons being that many of them were initiated into businesses at an early age which was much more lucrative and time consuming and left little time and resources to concentrate on education. However, since the community has prospered, now many parents are increasingly inclined to send their children to school. The occupational needs of the Chinese youth in North Bengal now are motivated to be successful businessman or migrate abroad. Therefore, Chinese in India have become conscious of the significance of education for the social mobility of their children. The preferred institutions are English-medium Convent schools mostly run by Christian missions. Therefore, to seek concessions in the admission in schools, many have converted to Christianity for utilitarian objective.

Mumbai has historical connections with China since British period. Parsi merchants made their fortune in the cotton and opium trade with China and developed a taste for Chinese porcelain, furniture, silk, and paintings. The First Opium War (1839-1842) disrupted the trade relations but love for Chinese products continued. These demands were fulfilled by Indian Chinese community catering to local demand. The two milestones in Mumbai are a Chinese cemetery atop Antop Hill (Sewri) and Kamathipura and the Chinese Temple on Nawab Tank Road (Mazagaon), dedicated to the legendary Chinese warrior king, Kwan Tai Kung (the Great One), which was consecrated in 1953 (Lentin, 2017). Nawab Tank Road was referred to as Old China Town and while Kamathipura was designated as New China Town at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The two oldest Chinese restaurants in Mumbai are Lok Jun (1895) on Shuklaji Street, in Kamathipura, and Nanking in Colaba opened in areas where Chinese families settled in large concentrations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lentin, 2017). They introduced the subtleties of Cantonese food to the Indian palate and also led to the creation of new dishes. The Chinese dentists mostly were traditional teeth-setters from Hupei, but today they are medically qualified professionals. Many Chinese dental clinics are still located on Falkland Road. Today, the Bombay-China business relationship has come full circle, especially for the Tata Group. It once had offices in coastal Chinese ports, like Shanghai, and today, Tata Consultancy Services, has a growing presence in China.

The India China war in 1962 changed the course of history for the Chinese presence in India. In the decade after the war many were deported to China and almost 3,000 Indian Chinese were interned in Deoli Camp (Rajasthan) and prisons

(Lentin, 2017). Those who were not interned faced harassment as their businesses were boycotted, movements and employment opportunities were curtailed, and families treated with suspicion. This forced many Chinese families to emigrate to Canada and the United States, and East to Hongkong and Australia. Interestingly, half a century later, the Toronto community still retains a cultural affinity with India from language to Bollywood movies. The Greater Toronto suburbs of Markham and Scarborough have the largest Bumbaiya Hindi and Bengali speaking Indian Chinese community. They also started their own clubs and associations, such as Hakka Helping Hands for its senior citizens, and the Association of Chinese India Deoli Internees, to mark the continuity of centuries old history of the Chinese community in India.

### *Sojourners and Middleman Minorities*

Most of the Chinese who came to India had no intention of settling in India, they only wanted to earn money and return to China (Liang: 2007: 403). This is a common characteristic of Chinese Diaspora which is very different from other traditional diasporas like Jews, African or Indian. Kuhn suggests, that there is no exact equivalent of the English word 'emigrant' in Chinese, meaning 'one who removes from his own land to settle (permanently) in another'. Therefore, the life of overseas Chinese is usually one of sojourning, of living temporarily away from home with the intention of returning sooner or later. Thus, the spatial dispersal of the Chinese family is a connection not a separation. They are always connected with their hometown in China despite many establishing homes in their host country. They also formed regional associations in order to preserve their culture and maintain connections with homeland (Kuhn: 2008: 4-5, 16). Thus, due to this sojourning mentality, they worked extremely hard for a period of time, and then returned back to their family in China for a break. Thus, there existed a 'corridor' as a channel of connections between the migrant and homeland (*qiaoxiang*) (Pan, 2014).

Bonacich's (1973) theory of 'middleman minorities' emphasises both their role as middlemen between the ruling elite and the working masses, as well as the sojourner mentality that determines their economic and social conditions and shapes their lives. The greatest advantage of sojourning mentality is the emergence of a high degree of internal solidarity. Therefore, based on this, it can be argued that the segregation of the Chinese community in India is a consequence of being a middleman minority, rather than a reaction to hostility from the host society. Thus, the Chinese community in British India was actively self-segregated, rather than just passively marginalized from Indian society (Pan, 2014).

In the past two centuries the relationship of Chinese community with host society has gone through various ups and downs in different stages with diverse forms. The self-segregation and the choice of profession has been important factors in shaping the relations between Chinese and the host society. Although, the Chinese

emigrated to India seeking better economic opportunities under British, they were concentrated in 'middleman' occupations like carpentry and shoemaking. They were never marginalised, nor was their status at the bottom of the Indian society. They were sojourners maintaining corridors towards their homeland and strangers to the host society by self-segregation.

The India-China conflict of 1962 further accentuated the gap as it generated an impression among Indians that the Chinese are not trustworthy which led to the disconnection of the channel with their homeland. Thereafter, Chinese in Kolkata started to settle and fully develop their tannery business which resulted in marginalised social status. However recently, they have started to present themselves as a cultural ethnic minority in Indian society, and recasting Tangra as a 'Chinatown' after their shift of occupation from tannery to Chinese restaurants (Pan, 2011). Thus, the Chinese community in India has never fully acculturated or assimilated to Indian culture or society. After 1962 conflict, many Indian Chinese immigrated to other countries in North America and Europe and have reconstituted their identity as 'Indian Chinese' and renewed their relationships with their old home in India (Oxford: 2005: 679). Therefore, the Chinese in India have evolved their identity from Chinese sojourners to 'Indian Chinese' in last two centuries.

### *Ethnicity and Relations with host society*

Ellen Oxford (2007) explores the identity of Hakka Chinese during 1980s who had found a profitable niche in Kolkata's leather industry. She argues that the Kolkata's ethnic economy is differentiated into economic niches based on caste, language, ethnicity and religion. Moreover, the Hakkas continued their identification based on distinct ethnicity and as 'guest people'. They distinguished themselves from other groups including both Indian, Cantonese and Hubeinese Chinese.

Oxford (2007) expands the definition of ethnicity and adds both the self-perceptions and ascription of ethnic identity. The ethnic group may incorporate, reject, invert or ignore the images others have of them. Thus, ethnic identity is viewed here as dialogical or reflexive, in the sense that it is created, maintained and reaffirmed through a continuous set of oppositions between one's own group and others. Therefore, in the case of establishing and maintaining Kolkata Hakka identity, three elements are significant: state and national politics; an ethnically differentiated and stratified economy; and a host society with a religious system based on the symbolic opposition between purity and impurity. Therefore, language, religion, caste, class and regional origin is the basis of differentiation and associated with clusters of occupational groups in Kolkata. This is reflected in both spatial and occupational demarcations and help maintain social separation. Each group maintains its separation from the others through endogamy and preservation of their district culture.

Similarly, the leather business is also organised according to linguistic, caste,

religious and/ or regional categories. And, Hakkas are one of the many groups associated with a particular economic niche. Chinese are also associated with a country which had hostile relations with India and engaged in occupations considered low. This had a significant impact on their status. Interestingly, most of the occupations engaged in by Kolkata Chinese like hairdressing, restaurant business, tanning and shoemaking of the Hakka, the carpentry of the Cantonese or the dentistry of the Hubeinese are associated with low-caste activities in traditional Hindu thought. Therefore, a society which accords status on the notions of purity and pollution of occupations looks down upon the Indian Chinese and accords them a lower status. Interestingly, Oxfeld (2007) suggests that the peripheral geographical location of the Chinese within Kolkata's urban space is in many ways analogous to that of an untouchable community within an Indian village. Though there are several explanations for this peripheral location, but this geographic marginality and their degraded occupation has isolated the Hakka tanners more than other Chinese subgroups in Kolkata. This had a significant impact on their interactions with the host society and construction of an ethnic identity.

Despite being surrounded by all-encompassing caste system which is pervasive in all walks of life and has pervaded into even other religions like Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and others, it has not seeped in the Indian Chinese. In fact, Chinese favour the status system based on wealth and rejected caste ideology. Historically, Chinese history is marked by monetary thinking and commoditisation which is reflected in Chinese trade Diaspora.

### *Chinese religious Identity*

Zhang Xing (2009) argues that the Chinese immigrants had built several Chinese temples in Kolkata in the nineteenth century. These temples dedicated to Tianhou, Caishen (god of wealth), Guanyin and Bodhisattva among the Kolkata Chinese are examples of continuation of Chinese traditions and belief systems. The temples served as meeting places for the community apart from being religious shrines. Most of these religious practices played a vital role in preserving the Chinese identity. Though, various Indic elements have also permeated into the religious practices of the community giving it a distinct character. He cites three examples: the reverence of Atchew, the legendary 'first' Chinese immigrant to India; the practice of divination at the Taishou *gong* (Taishou temple); and the worship of the Indian Goddess Kali. These unique beliefs and practices specify the complex, hybrid and syncretic Chinese and Indian identities of the Chinese community in Kolkata.

Chinese trader Yang Dazhao (Cantonese: *Yong Tai Chow*) or Atchew was the first person to visit India in eighteenth century and established the first settlement in Kolkata. The settlement came to be known as Achipur (Acchipur) after his death in 1783. Every Chinese resident of Kolkata and elsewhere in India pays respect considering him to be the 'first' immigrant from China. The veneration of Atchew is

significant as Indian Chinese consider him as their collective ancestor, the founding father of the community in India. For centuries, the veneration of ancestors has been a common practice in Chinese tradition. At one hand, it underscores the continuity of Chinese tradition and at the other it marks their origin as a community in India.

The Taishou temple (Hakka: *Tai Sau Koung*) is located in Tangra, Kolkata. It is dedicated to the cult of Lady Shou (literally, 'longevity') which was transmitted from Guangdong province of China to India. Additionally, it has framed pictures of Lady Liao Li Qiu (Hakka: *Liao Lee Chiu*), who migrated to Kolkata and popularised the cult. After her death, people started worshipping her too. The veneration at Taishou temple indicate the merging of local folk beliefs of the Chinese migrants with an immigrant who lived in India. It has added a new dimension to their cultural life that connects both their Chinese heritage and the place they inhabit.

An interesting case of cultural acculturation is the worship of Hindu Goddess Kali by Chinese community in India. The Chinese residents of Kolkata, mostly women used to frequent the Kali temple (fertility goddess) at Kalighat during 1940s and 50s. In 1970s, Chinese residents of Kolkata build a Hindu temple at Tangra. The worship of Kali is a significant case of penetration of Indic influences in the religious beliefs of the Chinese community in Kolkata. In fact, it is perhaps the only instance when the Chinese community in Kolkata has accepted an Indian deity without any modifications and is entirely of local origin. It adds an Indian identity to the migrant population that has largely been able to maintain its traditional Chinese belief system. The local Hindus and ethnic Chinese residents of Tangra come together to share a common religious belief at this Kali temple.

The Chinese beliefs in ancestor worship and divination is maintained in the religious activities at Achipur, Taishou and Kali temple. These beliefs are intimately linked to the ways in which the Chinese residents in Kolkata maintain their ethnic identity. The practices are unique to the Chinese community in Kolkata and are related to the history and experiences of the community in India. While the veneration at Achipur are connected to the community's origins in India, the Taishou temple commemorates the contribution of an ordinary Chinese immigrant in India. The worship of Kali is indicative of the community's willingness to incorporate Indian tradition into its religious system. In the context of the wider history of the overseas Chinese, this mixture of Chinese and India-related beliefs gives the community a distinct cultural identity. But, it is perhaps one of the many identities they have acquired over the course of over two hundred years in Kolkata.

There are other significant aspects of religious practices among the Indian Chinese community in Kolkata. Most of the Christians among the Chinese community of Kolkata converted after coming to India due to the economic and educational needs of the community. Similarly, few Chinese residents of Kolkata also converted to Islam and later migrated to Saudi Arabia (Ali: 1982: 88–89).

There is a new wave of Chinese emigrants in India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to seize

the economic opportunities opened by growing Indian economy specially in IT and high-tech manufacturing sector. These emigrants are young, educated, entrepreneur and English speaking which reflects the contrast of features from first generation Chinese emigrants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Bengaluru in Karnataka, Gurgaon in Haryana, Sri city in Andhra Pradesh, Chennai in Tamil Nadu, Ahmedabad in Gujarat and Mumbai and Pune in Maharashtra are places where current flow of Chinese are homing in. Few of the entrants are also students making India their destination for English, IT and Hindi learning in various Indian universities and institutions such as Osmania University, VIT, JNU, EDI, DU and others. The total number of these floating Chinese is around more than 5000. These current entrants come on working and business visa as well as student visa to realise their Indian dreams. Few of the Indian Chinese have also married Indian and have been accorded 'X' visa which allows them long term residency in India.

### **DIASPORIC ENGAGEMENT**

Both India and China are emerging powers of Asia in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both the countries have few common characteristics like world's one third of population resides in these two countries and their diasporas numbering almost 80 – 90 million are spread across the globe. Both the countries are fastest growing large economies with their own specialisations in manufacturing and services along with a huge market. Moreover, both have a long history of rich cultural and civilisational heritage along with continuous cultural interactions and connections. Additionally, both were at the centre of western colonial legacy and their freedom movements. After independence, both have traversed different trajectories of political and economic growth as discussed above. Therefore, both have remained at the centre of attention of the world in terms of their political and economic leadership in Asia and the world. One of the interesting facets of comparison between the two has been their differential nature of engagement with their diasporas.

The nature, history and emergence of Indian and Chinese diasporas has been distinct. The global migration of Indian diaspora began during the colonial period which mostly consisted of indentured and kangani labourers, free and passage migrants. The majority of colonial diaspora consisted of labour migration (Cohen, 2008). Whereas, the Chinese diaspora also did emerge during the colonial period, but the nature of this diaspora was different as it mainly consisted of traders. Thus, the trajectories of both the diasporas has been different. The post-colonial diasporas are of similar nature i.e. migrants looking for better opportunities. Though, the trajectories of both the diasporas has been different due to the existing networks and capital on which the new diasporas build on.

The response of Indian government towards its diasporas remained cold till the 1990s, and only in 21<sup>st</sup> century it has started engaging with it proactively in constructive and productive ways. Since 2003, Government of India started

celebrating Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas to reach out to its diaspora and took various measures to connect and engage with its diaspora on the recommendations of High-Level Committee Report (Singhvi, 2002). The Overseas Citizen of India cards, 'Bharat ko Jaano', and other means were adopted to engage with youths, businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, activists, artists and others (Migration Policy Centre, 2012). Moreover, other economic, political, and social concessions and incentives were also offered to engage with them. The Ministry of External Affairs along with department of Overseas Indian Affairs deals with the issues of emigrants and diasporas. Though, many would argue that there are still various bottlenecks in India's diaspora policy which makes it more reactive rather than pro-active (The Hindu, 2015).

In comparison, China has a pro-active policy approach towards its diaspora since 1970s. Chinese government has strong institutional mechanism for diaspora engagement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries in association with five state institutions<sup>1</sup> formulate and implement policies for the Chinese diaspora (Agarwal, 2017). This institutional infrastructure has played a significant role as the basis of transnational development and growing global reach towards its diasporas (Hong & Dongen, 2016). Moreover, there is an overseas expert advisory committee consisting of prominent personalities, bureaucrats, scientists, academicians and business persons of Chinese origin from various countries who give their advice and recommendations on Diaspora policies. China has proactively and aggressively pursued its diasporas in order to attract the capital, skills, technology, knowledge, venture and enterprise through various programmes and policies. There are scholarships and employment opportunities for highly-skilled diaspora. Therefore, China has been successful in attracting a substantial number of *haigui* or 'sea turtles' (returnees) to return and join Chinese universities and research parks (Agarwal, 2017). Moreover, they have been very successful in attracting capital and investment from ethnic Chinese. They have also been concerned with the wellbeing of Chinese in host countries. China has been pursuing the Chinese Dream, since 2012, which has been the foundation for the present diaspora engagement.

Even though, the emphasis and approach of the Indian and Chinese governments differs towards its diasporas, both recognise their significance as sources of both economic and social remittances and consider them their economic, political and cultural ambassadors in global arena. The diasporas have extremely strong attachments, affinity and a sense of shared identity towards its homeland which transcends the borders of nation-states. China has been very successful in engaging with its diaspora and use it as leverage for its larger geopolitics and economic development. Chinese diaspora policies have appeals of both emotional attachment through patriotism and institutional support for economic, political and social engagements.

Zhu (2007) in his comparative study on role of Indian and Chinese diaspora in

United States points out that both the diasporas have not only contributed positively to the economic development of their homelands but also helped in promoting relations between their homeland and host land. Further, he argues that the significant roles of diasporas in their homelands' development and foreign relations is strongly determined by both economic development strategies as well as political history and culture of their homelands (Zhu, 2007). Moreover, the state of bilateral relations between the homeland and host land determines the ability of the diasporas to influence the relations between the two. The relations between India and China are historical and had its ups and downs, though there is perceptibly positive approach and economic pragmatism playing a significant role in their relations. The economic pragmatism has led to the revival of socio-cultural, economic and political linkages between the two for furthering their larger goals in regional and global politics. The major irritants have taken a backseat for furthering their present goals.

The deepening of relations between the two have increased the interactions at various levels and has also led to the movement of people precipitating into new diasporas. The new layers of diasporic population with novel interactions and destinations have added more colour and richness to their interactions. The Indian Chinese diaspora, though, historically neglected by China due to their small number and insignificant economic and political presence but has a significant cultural presence and distinct cultural identity. This was very much visible in the election campaigns in Kolkata in the run up for general elections of India 2019, where the political parties have been wooing the Indian Chinese voters and campaigning in Chinese language.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, we conclude that the Chinese Diaspora in India though numerically small has a visible presence and distinct cultural identity. The Indian Chinese are present both in terms of material and non-material cultural artefacts in India. Thus, to evoke the analogy explicated by Avtar Brah (1999), the Chinese in India might be '*ajnabi*' (stranger) but not '*ghair*' (alien). It signifies that though many Chinese might be strangers to Indians, but they have possibility of mutual affection and relations rather than hostility associated with aliens. The Indian Chinese have carved out a distinct space and identity and has ability to bring forth perceptive changes in future among the two countries and cultures. They are also host to the new immigrants and make them feel at home in Kolkata and Mumbai. The new immigrants can take advantage of the old to anchor and establish themselves and carve out a dignified space and productive roles. Thus, this continuity of diasporic presence has potential to play a significant role in the development of relations between India and China in future.



*Notes*

1. State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, China Zhigong Party, Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan Compatriots and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese

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