

Oral History As Alternative History: Chinese Community Of Assam During Sino-Indian War, 1962

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ABSTRACT:

“In all history there is no war which was not hatched by the governments alone, independent of the interests of the people, to whom war is always pernicious even when successful.”—Leo Tolstoy

Wars may create winners and heroes, but they also generate suffering and sacrifice. Apart from loss of lives of soldiers, there are other chapters of suffering which deserves to be a part of any discussion of war. Most of the writings on South Asian history are dominated by elitist history, where the subalterns are obscured. The Sino-Indian war of 1962 is no exception. Even though it is a widely researched topic, the existing works have failed to incorporate the sufferings of marginalized section of society. The Chinese community living in Assam had to face harsh consequences when war broke out between India and China. Being a minority, their sufferings never found a mention in official records. Moreover, they could not initiate steps to record their history. In the absence of written histories, oral history provides an opportunity to rewrite the past by incorporating the experiences and contributions of all sections of society. This paper is an attempt to recover the history of Chinese community in India through the application of oral history. Particular emphasis is given to Sino-Indian war of 1962, as it was a watermark event in the history of Chinese community in India.

INTRODUCTION

The Sino-Indian war of 1962 is an important event in the post-independent history of India. The war started as a border skirmish from the early months of 1962, reaching the climax on 20th October when Chinese forces had launched a massive attack on Indian posts at Khenzeman in North East Frontier Agency. Within a month, all frontier posts of Indian army had fallen. On 20th November, China declared unilateral ceasefire bringing an end to

the war. The questions related to the high-politics and outcomes of the war in political, military and economic context are innumerable. A huge number of works have been composed by army officials, policy-makers and academics narrating their interpretation about the causes and consequences of the war. However, like many works of South Asian Historiography, their works have emphasized more on the high politics and the elites neglecting the general population who too had to bear sufferings as a consequence of 1962 border conflict.

If we talk of the casualties of combatant forces, both Indian and Chinese army lost many lives; casualties being higher on the Indian side. According to Indian Defence Ministry report released in 1965, 1383 Indian soldiers were killed and 1696 were missing in action.ⁱ With the initiative of Red Cross Society, many Prisoners of War were released by both the nations. Apart from the loss of lives of soldiers, there are other chapters of suffering as a consequence of war which equally deserves to be a part of war literature. The war of 1962 had crushing effect on a small but significant Chinese population living in Assam. As per the provisions of Defence of India act of 1962, all persons belonging to Chinese community were arrested. Women, children and aged, no one were spared. People were separated overnight, friends became enemies and properties were lost. They were kept as captives for three years after which many were sent back to China. In the process, many families were separated from their kith and kin.

THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN INDIA

The history of the Chinese community in India dates back to over two hundred years. South Asia's first Chinatown was established by the Chinese in Calcutta shortly after the British made it the capital of colonized India. Before this, some Chinese had already started settling down in Achipur, a town about 33 kilometers from Calcutta. In fact, the name Achipur derives from the first reported Chinese immigrant to the region nicknamed Atchew, whose real name was Yang Dazhao. Atchew came to Bengal in 1778 to trade. In exchange for the tea he had brought from China, Atchew received a large land grant from the British Governor-General, Warren Hastings, on which he set up a sugar mill. He later brought Chinese labourers to work for him. Thus, seems to have begun the history of the Chinese community in India.ⁱⁱ

Attracted by business opportunities, many others followed Atchew down the decades to Eastern India. From the 1830s onwards, the British started getting people from China to work on Assam's tea plantations. Many others were refugees from poverty, famine, hunger and floods in China, and fresh off the boat they made themselves useful as carpenters, shoemakers, mechanics, traders and the like. By the late 19th century, the people of Chinese origin had established themselves in eastern India as skilled craftsmen and traders. Several tea garden workers picked up some of these skills, moved to urban areas, and did well with businesses of their own. In Assam, Chinese masons and carpenters were much sought after till even a few decades ago. In Calcutta, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Shillong, Chinese shoemakers and dentists were acknowledged to be the best in their fields. Many had also set up successful businesses of their own, by opening Chinese restaurants and beauty parlours.ⁱⁱⁱ

Skilled in crafts and dentistry, they lived a prosperous life in different parts of Assam. The worsening ties between India and China brought havoc to the lives of Chinese spread across Eastern India. In spite of being innocent, they had to face trial under the provisions of the Defence of India Act, 1962^{iv}.

ORAL HISTORY AS ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: THE POLITICAL VICTIMS OF THE WAR

The recovery of diverse suppressed histories is an important task. Through the collection and dissemination of personal testimonies and narratives, oral history brings to light and preserve histories of individuals and communities which might otherwise remain completely neglected and hidden on account of the inability of many of these groups to record their own experiences in the face of their everyday struggle to make ends meet and inaccessibility of resources. Such efforts aimed at recovering suppressed memories and recollections- which are in most cases likely to unearth experiences of brutal exploitation, oppression and targeting – can serve to democratize the historical space and integrate these remembrances within the broader collective memory. The outpouring of these memories and recollections often clearly challenge the more sanitized official versions of history and can become a focal point for demanding a more just and equitable society.

During the course of my research, I have gone through archival materials and newspapers. But in such official versions of history, the narratives of the Chinese community in India are

totally absent. Even the newspapers of 1962 have not found single mention of the detention and deportation of Chinese people living in India. After the publication of historical fiction, *Makam* by Rita Choudhury, the incident has come to public attention. For my research I have relied mainly on oral testimonies to look at the incident and its aftermath. My respondents include the detained persons who were direct witnesses of the incident as well as their offspring whose narratives are based on their predecessors' account. To establish authenticity, newspapers have also been consulted.

In Assam, the Chinese community lived with other migrant communities from Bihar, Jharkhand and the like to work in tea estates. As their language is distinct from Indian language, it was difficult for the Chinese people to communicate with others. Even the Chinese sub-groups used different dialects. With time, they developed a language which was a mixture of Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and other dialects spoken by the tribal groups who had migrated from northern parts of India. Even today, many of them in Assam communicate in this language. As most of the earlier migrants were not accompanied by women, intermarriage happened with local women belonging to different communities like Assamese, Adivasis, Mizo, Khasi, Kachari and the like. In this way, they created a mixed identity for the new generation. However, reverence for Chinese customs and traditions continued and care was taken to preserve them. Apart from knowledge of local language, their offspring were also taught Chinese language. A formal school was also opened for this purpose.

As narrated by Shiu Wing Yem^v, her grandfather came to India in search of work as the economic condition of China was very poor at that time. He initiated his career in carpentry. After establishing himself as a successful carpenter in Dibrugarh area, he married a Khamti woman. When Second World War broke out, he even joined the second British Division of the Allied Forces at Kohima. His children were also married to persons of indigenous communities. In this way, they have intermixed with the local population. Never did they feel as an alien in Assam, it was their '*janambhumi*', the motherland.^{vi}

On 19th November, 1962, the last day of Sino – Indian war, Chinese people living in different places were rounded up by the armed forces and compelled to leave their home. Shiu Wing Yem was eight years old when she alongwith her siblings were captured by police and forcibly taken into a cowshed. They were not allowed to carry anything with them except government papers. After three days, they were transported to a prison camp in Nagaon where they were imprisoned for three years. Shiu's paternal uncle married an Assamese

woman. Therefore, she was spared alongwith her children. But her husband was arrested. It is to be mentioned here that in Assam, it was difficult for the administration to separate the Chinese-origin people from the non-Chinese. Most of them had been living in Assam for two to three generations. As they intermixed with the indigenous people of Assam, the genetical Mongoloid characteristics diminished. As such, the administration could not differentiate the Chinese-origin people from the indigenous population. The authorities, in a haphazard manner arrested those who they assumed to be Chinese. In this way, families were separated. Husbands were separated from wives; children were separated from parents, and so on. The same happened with Shiu Wing's uncle. While in captivity, they were asked to choose whether they want to stay in India with citizenship or wish to go back to their ancestral land. Shiu's uncle decided to go back to China. Due to uncertain future in the new country, he considered it right to leave his wife and children in Assam. He planned that after establishing himself in China, he will take back his family. But he could never venture a trip to Assam due to financial and political constraints. Decades later, his son visited him in China. He spent his whole life alone, struggling to make a means for survival. On the other hand, his wife stayed back in Tezpur alongwith his children.^{vii}

“Policemen came knocking on our door one late November morning and said we’d have to go with them for just three days for our own safety. They didn’t allow us to take anything, not even an extra pair of clothes,” remembers Wang Shing Tung, 61, who now runs Hong Kong Restaurant in Tinsukia. His grandfather and father, Wong Shu who had come to Calcutta in 1939, ran a trading post there before moving base to Tinsukia a decade later to set up a sawmill. The Lee Hing Sawmill flourished, supplying railway sleepers and so on. The family, at the peak of prosperity owned six elephants, 14 trucks and several smaller vehicles. Shu was bundled off along with his Chinese-origin wife and five children, and also his elder brother’s family of eight, in a truck headed for a jail in Nagaon district, from where they were put on a train to Deoli in Rajasthan. It was a long, seven-day journey of utter suffering. They were not provided enough food and water. Wong Shu’s son has mentioned about an incident when to quench thirst of a baby, the mother had to collect water from potholes formed as a result of plying of heavy army vehicles. Many died on the way to Rajasthan. One of Shu’s daughter also died of heat stroke. A Nepali manager whom Mr. Shu had trusted was asked to look after the property. Their sufferings during the journey is a different chapter which Lee, Shu’s wife refused to talk about. “*Rajasthan mein bohut accha tha. Kuch bhi dukh nahi hua tha waha.*” – Lee replied when asked about her experience in Deoli camp. Their son

confessed that the Nepali manager betrayed them. Their property was occupied. When they were released from prison, they had to go through immense poverty. However, the family managed to spring back.^{viii}

Sun Fu Thian was a dentist by profession. He served in Shillong, from where he was arrested alongwith other family members. He has explained about his life in Deoli prison camp, “The prison camp was spread over a 1 sq km area in the middle of a desert, adjoining the small town of Deoli.” There were five wings—all barrack-like concrete structures—that housed over 7,000 inmates. The blocks were partitioned into smaller units, each with three rooms and a common courtyard, where the inmates used to rear poultry. They were not given clothes or any bedding by the jailers. “The Red Cross stepped in and gave us clothes, biscuits, milk powder, soap and other essentials,” says Sun Fu Thian^{ix}. “Apart from daily dry rations, their jailers used to hand out monthly coupons of Rs 10 and Rs 1.50 to every adult and child, respectively, to buy essentials from a canteen. It just wasn’t enough to get by.”^x Although they were confined inside the camp; functions of all kind, such as marriage parties etc were organized just like usual days, but with less amenities.

However, not all families were equally affected during the war. Yankey Ho had a smoother life compared to his counterparts. Ho was a worker in Makum Bharat Engineering works. His daughter Kamlan Ho remembered that her father had not return from office on that particular day. By the end of the day, they learned about the arrest of Chinese people in massive numbers. After enquiry, they got to know that Yankey has been transported to a cowshed alongwith other inmates. As Yankey’s wife was an Assamese woman, therefore police did not arrest her. But she voluntarily submitted herself to police and asked for her arrest too. She preferred imprisonment to separation. The police obliged. The family was kept at Nagaon prison camp. When asked about her experience in the camp, Kamlan, daughter of Ho said that as a child she was unaffected by the capture. Unlike others, their family was not separated. The daily activities of playing, meeting with friends continued just like other days. After three years, they were released from prison. Their property was assigned to the custody of Kamlan’s maternal uncle who was an Assamese. Because of Indian connection, their property was saved from auction or loot by unhealthy elements of society. Kamlan’s children have intermixed with indigenous people of Assam. Gradually, Chinese culture is fading away from their lives, although the titles have remained.^{xi}

The sufferings of Chinese Indians did not end in internment and re-establishment only. Those who stayed on in India had to face severe restrictions on their movements. The local authorities found them easy targets for extortion. Till mid-1990s, they had to obtain permits from the police to travel to any place. They had to renew permits after every three months. They even had to get permission to travel anywhere beyond a seven kilometre radius of their homes. Such conditions went on till 1974. It was only after mid-1980s that these restrictions were withdrawn.^{xii}

During the interviews, one thing became apparent that Chinese community living in India has still the fear of persecution, being an outsider. When asked about their rights as citizen of the nation, they said that they have full rights as other citizens of India. However, very few people have managed to get a government job. Most of them have tried their luck in business and they have become successful too.

“We do not want a war to happen again. We will be the biggest sufferers. The ones who have posed as our friends can turn into enemies. We cannot be sure about the support of the locals. During war, everything can change.” – Jackson Yem^{xiii} said.^{xiv}

Ko Linda Ko is a Chinese born in Assam who has settled in Hongkong. On her youtube channel, she documents the functions of Chinese of Indian origin. The videos are testimony of their strong emotional connection to India. The songs of Lata Mangeskar and Muhammad Rafi still unites them. Far away from India, they have kept the Indian culture alive. They call India as their ‘Janambhumi’, the motherland. Every year, one or two batches of Chinese come to visit Makum, the town where they were born and spent their childhood.

CONCLUSION

Oral history provides an opportunity to write history of the marginalized, oppressed and dominated. As narrated in earlier paragraphs, the sufferings borne by the Chinese community in India would have remained hidden from history if historians had relied on traditional sources. The archival documents and newspapers have not mentioned about the detainment and transportation of the Chinese community. In the absence of such findings, oral history works as an alternative source of history.

ⁱ Malik, V. P. *Kargil from Surprise to Victory*. Harper Collins. 2010. p.343

ⁱⁱ The Bowbazar Chinatown Author(s): Zhang Xing Source: India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, INDIACHINA Neighbours Strangers (WINTER 2009 SPRING 2010), pp. 396-413 Published by: India International Centre Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23006425> Accessed: 22-05-2018 09:27 UTC

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/india/the-1962-jailing-of-chinese-indians> accessed on 20th March, 2018, 10.30 pm

^{iv} Defence of India Act 1962 in details <http://legislative.gov.in/actsofparliamentfromtheyear/defence-india-act-1962> accessed on 15th March 2018, 9.30 pm

^v A beautician who runs parlour at Joypur, Dibrugarh district, Assam. She is an Indian of Chinese origin who was interned during her childhood.

^{vi} Personal interview, Shiu Wing Yem, Tinsukia, 23rd November, 2017

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} Telephonic Interview, John Wong, 10th Feb, 2018

^{ix} Dentist by profession, was based in Shillong during Sino-Indian war

^x <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/india/the-1962-jailing-of-chinese-indians>, accessed on 20th March, 2018, 10.30 pm

^{xi} Personal interview, Kamlan Ho, (Originally recorded in Assamese, transcribed by me) Makum, 24th November, 2017

^{xii} <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/india/the-1962-jailing-of-chinese-indians> accessed on 20th march 2018, 10.40 pm

^{xiii} Teacher at Balya Bhawan School, Makum, Assam

^{xiv} Personal Interview, Jackson Yem, (Originally recorded in Assamese, transcribed by me) Makum, 24th November, 2017