

ICOA1994: REVIVAL OF KOLKATA'S CHINATOWN: DEMOCRACY AND ITS ROLE IN SAFEGUARDING THE HERITAGE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN INDIA

Subtheme 01: Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management

Session 3: World Heritage, Regulations and Guidelines, Authenticity and Integrity

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Abstract: The eclectic history of India's immigrant and minority communities have shaped and left an indelible imprint on its pluralistic ethos and cultural diversity. As a hallmark of India's democracy is the commitment to safeguard and integrate these diversities - ethnic or religious - into mainstream notions and approaches to urban heritage. And yet ethnic heritage is rapidly at risk due to a range of debilitating factors. As the India of today moves towards embracing the 'smart city' idea while turning a new tide towards majoritarian politics - what is the role and future of ethnic heritage in Indian cities? What are attitudes and approaches that permit their heritage-led regeneration, as a tool to contain gentrification, boost local economy while restoring urban spaces and streetscapes that celebrate diversity and inclusiveness?

This paper addresses the preservation and sustainable management of Kolkata's ethnic neighbourhoods, through the case of its Chinatown – the only such historic settlement in South Asia. The city's Chinese with a 250-year history, continue to enrich Calcutta's urban culture through built heritage and traditional practices. And yet Chinatown witnesses emigration and urban decline, low institutional will and political inertia. Invigorated through community-based urban strategies, initiated under The Cha Project, the paper establishes Chinatown's formal and associational values held closely by this ethnic minority.

A detailed architectural and cultural survey, its socio-cultural and economic mapping today informs the heritage-oriented urban regeneration for the Indian Chinese. The paper will elucidate pathways attempted by The Cha Project to seek answers for oft-contested issues of custody, ownership and collective identity within ethnic heritage in India. This ongoing project's appropriate implementation and success could be a watershed for urban conservation in Kolkata and a model for strengthening diversity of cultural experiences within fast-homogenizing Indian cities.

Key words: *community, ethnic-minority, revitalisation, participation*

1. Democracy and Ethnic Heritage

The eclectic history of India's immigrant and minority communities have shaped and left an indelible imprint on its pluralistic ethos and cultural diversity. As a hallmark of India's democracy is the commitment to safeguard and integrate these diversities - ethnic or religious - into mainstream notions and approaches to urban heritage. And yet ethnic heritage is rapidly at risk due to a range of debilitating factors. As the India of today moves towards embracing the 'smart city' idea while turning a new tide towards majoritarian politics - what is the role and future of ethnic heritage in Indian cities? What are attitudes and approaches that permit their heritage-led regeneration which celebrate diversity and inclusiveness? Through the case of Kolkata's Chinatown this paper attempts to expound upon one such approach and methodology.

2. Ethnic Heritage of Kolkata's Chinatown

The history of the Chinese in Kolkata spans across four broad categories. The first wave of migration from China in the 18th century was marked by the setting up of sugar mills in 1778. The second wave of settlers disembarked at Kolkata's port from the 1830s onwards, their migration triggered by successive famines and frequent uprisings against the corrupt Manchurian Qing dynastic rule. In the third phase, Chinese population peaked in Kolkata at 26,250 persons during the post-WW II period as direct fallout of civil wars in China and Japanese invasions in Southeast Asia (Xing and Sen 2013: 205-226). Anchored within central Kolkata's Tiretti Bazaar, Chinatown grew as their first formal settlement in South Asia.¹ As an enterprising community comprising Cantonese carpenters and boat builders from Guangdong, Hakka leather tanners and shoe-makers from Meixian County, dentists and teeth-setters from Hubei province, and Shandong silk traders carved their niche market to thrive in Kolkata's economic heydays. The 1962 Sino-India border conflict, as the fourth key marker, rapidly deteriorated bilateral ties between India and China and irreversibly altered the community's future.² Some 3000 unsuspecting Indian Chinese were imprisoned and interned at Deoli Detention Camp in Rajasthan from 1962—1966, framed as spies or Communist sympathisers. Passport seizure, cancellation of trade licenses and confiscation of property were some further fallouts, along with the social stigma and mistrust that underlined their later release and rehabilitation. The disillusionment propelled a wave of mass emigration to the Anglo sphere in the 1970s (Bose 2014:14). Those that decided to remain in India resettled in Chinatown and Tangra to lead quiet, invisible lives while rebuilding their compromised identity.

Over the last five decades, newer low income communities have moved into the vacant or sealed properties, rapidly redeveloping them as multi-storeyed tenements. Land seized by the government was used to construct public-private sector offices towers. Six Chinese temples³ built from 1850-1920, each

¹ A second Chinatown, in the eastern Kolkata suburbs of Tangra, emerged in the 1920s and soon became the bastion of Hakka Chinese who specialised in leather trade and set up a flourishing business of tanneries. Chinatown at Tiretti Bazar remained predominantly Cantonese and this distinction continues till date.

² Struggles faced by the community as an aftermath of the Sino-India War has been deftly portrayed by documentary film-maker Rafeeq Ellias in the award-winning "The Legend of Fat Mama" (BBC, 2010) and "Beyond Barbed Wires, A Distant Dream" (2015).

³ The 19th century temples, consecrated to warrior gods and Lord Buddha have a nomenclature of 'Church,' as a remnant of colonial city surveys where identity was concealed to attain greater legitimacy and perhaps avoid desecration.

representative of an ethnic Chinese sub-culture, remain and serve as anchor points within today's amorphous urban boundaries of Chinatown. More modest social institutions, commercial establishments and residential tenements have intermingled with redeveloped properties and pockets of informal commerce to create a melee of architectural objects and incoherent streetscapes, except in Blackburn Lane (Fig.1).



Fig.1- Chinatown today (Kolkata, India). Streetscape and neighbourhood character of Blackburn Lane

The question then remains of who the key stakeholders will be in preservation of Chinatown's ethnic heritage? What ends will restoration of these isolated heritage buildings and structures serve without a long-term maintenance and reuse plan that is integral to local communities? The state government in West Bengal does not allocate any budget for restoration of listed, but privately-held heritage buildings, depending entirely on central funding schemes or international fundraising efforts. This puts a huge question mark over the future of a significant quantum of Kolkata's historic building inventory that is linked to ethnic diversity and plurality.

3. The CHA Project's Sustainable Development Strategies

It was for these challenges and concerns that The Cha Project (Cities • Heritage • Architecture) was initiated, as a community-centric urban strategy approach. Helmed by INTACH Kolkata and Singapore-based Buzz media, the project synchronises Chinatown's closely held formal and associational values with an integrated, forward-looking toolkit for its contemporary continuity.

Kolkata Chinatown's discreet disposition and seemingly unremarkable buildings, so unlike the contrived imagery of global counterparts, may come as an initial disappointment. As a migrant minority's claim on a city fabric, Chinatown systematically shies away from exuding traditional massing and cultural forms associated with the parent culture. Instead, the adoption of neoclassical facade-making principles that

adhere to the colonial political order is a guiding factor. Furthermore the post-1962 detention phase gave rise to an architecture of camouflage—discarding established frameworks to create multi-use typologies, as a tool for asserting and safeguarding ethnic identity over stylistic and visual expressions of culture (Bose 2016:42).

In seeking to revitalise Chinatown, therefore, the first unlearning for preservationists is the acknowledgement that historic architecture is not the sole spectacle. They form but one strand of a complex tapestry of socio-cultural parameters that together represent the true ethos of the place and community. Being situated within Kolkata's former 'Grey Town,' the broader context of cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism led to a 'Historic Urban Landscape'⁴ approach in accordance with UNESCO guidelines. The Cha Project therefore devised four key approaches to construct its preservation paradigm:



Fig.2- The Chinese community and their traditional enterprises within the settlement

Create a strong socio-cultural ecosystem

Tangible built heritage and artefacts provide a strong context to the intangible heritage embedded within each community. Life and activities on the streets is as strong an indicator of a traditional Chinese culture still alive that has intermeshed with contemporary narratives of change but retains its identity. Storytelling, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge systems and practices, and traditional skills form a key part. Not being reduced to tokenism or cultural exoticism is critical to their continuity, flourish and integration with contemporary Kolkata (Fig. 2).

⁴ As stated by UNESCO: The historic urban landscape approach moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment, and focuses on the entire human environment with all of its tangible and intangible qualities. It seeks to increase the sustainability of planning and design interventions by taking into account the existing built environment, intangible heritage, cultural diversity, socioeconomic and environmental factors along with local community values.

Business development and self-sustenance

Economic motives and enterprise forms the bedrock of migrant ethnic communities and the Chinese have traditionally been identified with proficiency in a number of native trades. Today the numbers of such independent family-run businesses have dropped but the commercial activities in Chinatown continue to retain, in its essence, the diversity and skill of previous generations (Bose2016:40). Examples of all trades, through retail outlets and workshops are present within a 1.5 km radius signifying continuity in knowledge systems while building strategies to scale the local economy and incubate new enterprise.

Restoration and new design interventions

A survey and documentation of Chinatown's urban heritage and architectural inventory became the first systematic method to identify, and evaluate the neighbourhood—an attempt that had not been undertaken before. All of the six Chinese temples are listed as Grade I heritage, and remains the most visible and compelling physical asset. The land use survey further identified a set of buildings which are inaccessible, misused, underused or vacant. Reprogramming that unlocked their economic potential was explored as a tool to enhance the social, recreational, tourism potential while introducing self-sustaining revenue models (Fig. 3).

Integrated approach to urban conservation and planning

Preservation objectives drastically fail when they are disengaged from broader issues of urban planning, infrastructure upgrade, participatory processes and social justice in historic cores. The preservation tools employed therefore reject pastiche and cosmetic approaches that transplant global and commercial notions of touristy Chinatowns. Integrated planning, which also addresses traffic management and pedestrian safety, sanitation and drainage, encroachment and hygiene, along with sensitive urban design, form the parallel pillars of the revitalisation paradigm.



Fig.3- Proposed new interventions and redesign concepts for existing structures (The Cha Project)

4. Local Community Engagement in Kolkata Chinatown

With a mandate of bringing together diverse stakeholders to galvanise a community-driven, heritage-oriented revitalisation of this last surviving bastion of the city's multicultural past, the Cha Project evolved a process model that is currently under implementation in various phases (DPR 2014:7). A three-pronged integrated approach of urban revitalisation, environmental improvement and economic empowerment has informed the key pathways. Four core processes are enumerated below:

Inclusion of fringe communities and new stakeholders

Taking cognisance of newer stakeholders, in a mixed demographic and mixed land-use area is crucial for an inclusive, holistic approach. Keeping the Chinese community at its heart, the process engages with stakeholders of public and private sector companies occupying high-rise typologies at one end, and street encroachments by the urban poor at the other. Under the current circumstances, the old and new must establish a harmonious coexistence in an effort to enhance the historic value of the area—for residents, workers and visitors alike.

Revival of the Community-driven Micro-economy

Facilitating economic development through livelihood opportunities is a key pathway for boosting the micro-economy. The Cha Project aimed to remedy this by first enhancing the local economy by boosting existing native trades and traditional skills while simultaneously incubating allied new ventures and

entrepreneurship. An organised food street and night market is part of the first phase while the second hinges on astute market research that identifies and creates a new network for existing and potential enterprises through business development strategies. Diversification of native skill sets, that allow access newer markets, survive competition, and address the new aspirations of community youth is the core objective.

An Inclusive Model using Social Capital Credits

The presence of a strong parallel informal economy coupled with inequities stemming from destitution, homelessness and squatting have created a social imbalance. The Cha Project does not view eviction as a way forward and hence has partnered with Asia Initiatives in New York to implement SoCCs⁵ or Social Capital Credits, a transformative system of exchange that could potentially minimise poverty on the streets of Chinatown. Residents can earn SoCC points by participating in community initiatives where credits earned can then be used for goods and services within the community.



Fig.4- Communication campaign for community-driven initiatives (The Cha Project)

Leadership and Self-Organised Community Cohesion

Unprecedented community cohesion, in the last four years, is paving the path for self-initiated, community-led efforts. A strong and united leadership under the Indian Chinese Association for Culture, Welfare and Development⁶ along with the temple associations are actively lobbying with state authorities, improving consular and diplomatic ties, leveraging media attention and seeking a reach and visibility for Chinatown that is beyond its boundaries. The Cha Project has opened new frontiers of self-expression

⁵ Social Capital Credits are an alternative system of exchange which uses social capital instead of financial capital. It is a scheme which allows residents of an area to trade actions and processes which have a positive social benefit for goods and services that they may not necessarily have had access to through the traditional financial economy.

⁶ Indian Chinese Association for Culture, Welfare and Development (ICACWD) is registered as a society under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961 and approved by the Government of West Bengal on 4/10/1999.

with a surge in community pride and confidence to enable the forging of new cultural collaborations. The recently launched Community Art Project, annual Dragon Boat Festival and the forthcoming Cheenapara Heritage Festival & Night Market 2018 are testimony to such community-driven initiatives (Fig. 4).

Chinatown's urban heritage today thrives as a multicultural, multi-ethnic and richly textured ensemble whose true potential as a cultural and economic asset to Kolkata and its people have long been unappreciated and unexplored. The Cha Project strongly recognised these aspects and attempted to introduce innovative, yet pragmatic strategies in urban revitalisation that are contextual and deeply embedded in local community values. The seeds of systemic change have been sown and the Cha Project's success can be a watershed moment for urban conservation and inclusive development in the region.

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