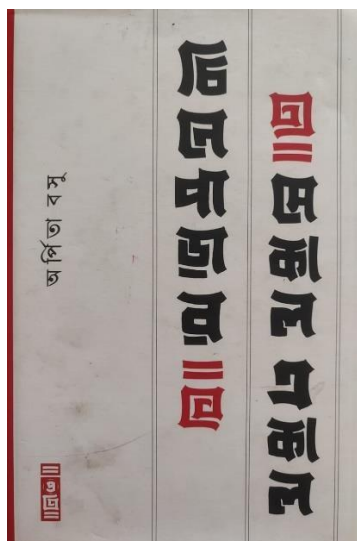

Book Review: Mapping the Chinese Legacy in Kolkata ¹

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Mapping the Chinese Legacy in Kolkata, Bose, A. (2019). *Chine padar ekal sekal* [The past and present of Chinatowns]. Prativash. 160 pp. ISBN 978-93-88735-44-5, Price Rs. 200



In the Bengali book *Chine Padar Ekal Sekal* (চীনে পাদার একাল সেকাল, The Past and Present of Chinatowns), Arpita Bose offers a ground-breaking exploration into the past and present of Kolkata's (formerly Calcutta) Chinese diaspora. She weaves together archival sources, oral histories, census records, and field visits to present a comprehensive portrait of a community that has remained on the margins. Kolkata is the only city in

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South Asia with two Chinatowns. However, the Chinese residents living in the city, despite a presence of over two centuries, have largely remained an enigma to most local people. The community is invisible in most of the mainstream academic works as well. This book stands apart for its attempt to present a holistic picture of the diaspora.

The author begins by locating her study in relation to existing literature on the Chinatowns of Calcutta. It has been mentioned that earlier research works on Kolkata's Chinese community, except the research done by Zhang Xing, did not use much archival materials. Bose on the other hand has consulted 47 Intelligence Bureau files, 27 Home Department (Political) Confidential files, and 3 Special Branch files. That apart, she has used oral history, census data, the District Gazetteer etc. Some readers might look for more precise dates. However, there are enough chronological references to understand historical transitions clearly.

The second chapter discusses the emergence of Chinese settlements in Bengal in details. The first Chinese colony in Bengal was established in 1781 by Yang-Ta-Chao. He was a sailor, and the colony was situated at a distance of fifteen miles from Kolkata, on the bank of the river Ganga, near Budge Budge. In that place, he had set up a sugar factory. He died in 1783 and thereafter the colony disappeared. Later, the place was named after him Achipur (p. 22). The temple he had established, and his tomb, are still there.

Thereafter, the Chinese shifted to Calcutta. Gradually, two Chinese neighbourhoods developed. The first Chinatown appeared in central Calcutta. The second one came up in Tangra. Archival materials show that these settlements were unhygienic and overcrowded from the beginning. However, in spite of harsh living conditions, the Chinese were able to create a vibrant Chinese cultural landscape with temples, Chinese schools, eateries, and decorated streets. At one time there were five Chinese schools in Calcutta (p. 134). Bose provides detailed demographic statistics—362 Chinese residents in 1837, rising to 1,640 in 1901 and peaking at 11,000 by 1962 (p. 31). The 1962 Sino-Indian war dramatically altered this trajectory. The community faced widespread suspicion,

surveillance, and persecution— including job dismissals from sensitive sectors like the port, internment at Deoli camp in Rajasthan, and difficulties in acquiring Indian citizenship thereafter. During the war, the Government of India suspected them to be engaged in spying for the enemy country China. As a result, they were viewed as a threat to national security. Even decades later, the fear of harassment remained. Over the years, many migrated abroad, particularly to developed countries like Canada. However, they still retained emotional ties to Kolkata. Many of them return to the city at the time of the Chinese New Year. The book cites a *Times of India* article, published in 2007, which reports that only 5,000 Chinese were living in Kolkata (p. 31).

The third chapter of the book explores social customs, religious beliefs, and changing family structures. The research notes that the traditional Chinese joint family system gradually gave way to nuclear families (p. 42). Earlier, adoption practices existed among childless couples, often involving payments to the biological parents to compensate their expenses for the care of the child in the initial years (p. 43). The community adhered to patriarchal traditions, believing that dying without a male heir condemned one to become an evil spirit. Belief in astrology was also quite common. With the passing of time, most of the families had converted to Christianity and they have Christian names. However, the elders of the family also give each child a Chinese name to preserve their culture (p. 44).

After the World War II, social environment witnessed change in the Chinese enclaves. Economic hardship forced some former Chinese soldiers into crime like engaging in extortion, robbery, and smuggling (pp. 61–62). Chinatown restaurants doubled as opium dens and brothels after dark. Apart from the Chinese, women from Burma and Nepal too were trafficked into prostitution rings (pp. 64, 67). The decline in criminal activity, following the Sino-Indian war, is documented through oral narratives and police reports (p. 69). Bose has referred to fictional portrayals of Chinatown – as a den of crime – in Bengali detective stories by Nihar Ranjan Roy, and in Hindi cinema like *Howrah Bridge* (p. 139). At the same time, she also highlights more empathetic depictions, notably in

Jhao Jhien Hatya Rahashya by Suchitra Bhattacharya (p. 139). Thus, the book takes a very objective, balanced, and unbiased position.

The most important part of the book is that it highlights an overlooked dimension of the community's history: political activism. There were massive internal divisions between the supporters of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The Kuomintang opened its first office in Calcutta in 1911 (p. 76), eventually expanding to Bombay and to the tea gardens of North Bengal. Political activists from China frequently visited India. They organized dramas, collected donations, and published propaganda journals (p. 79). The discussion shows how politics can deeply affect the fabric of the diaspora community. Tensions between political factions led to violent confrontations—tanneries owned by Kuomintang supporters were torched (pp. 95–96), a Communist activist was murdered, and even marriages broke down over political differences (p. 96).

The research reveals connections between Chinese activists and prominent Indian leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Soumendra Nath Thakur (p. 99), and also some Communist figures (p. 81). The Chinatown had links with revolutionary groups like the Anushilan Samiti and the Gadar Party. The secluded space was used for supplying smuggled weapons and offering refuge to underground activists (pp. 98–99). While the Chinese immigrants admired Mahatma Gandhi, they were not with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bengal's political icon, for his alignment with Japan, China's wartime enemy (p. 99).

The book also examines occupational patterns and class relations. The Chinese community was known for excellence in tanning, shoemaking, hairdressing, carpentry, and dentistry. Chinese street hawkers sold silk and acrobats performed in circuses during winter (p. 106). Their restaurants in Kolkata invented the now-iconic Indian Chinese cuisine. That apart, many skilled Chinese men worked in aircraft factories and railway workshops (p. 107). Bose also sheds light on illegal activities like money laundering (p. 108). Labor disputes between Chinese shoe manufacturers and Dalit workers reveal inter-community tensions. In 1941, 2,000 cobblers under the Harijan

Udhdhar Samiti, led by MLA Radhanath Das, went on strike for wage increase. At one point of time, the Chinese Consul General tried to mediate to resolve the conflict (p. 120). These labor movements demonstrate the community's negotiation with local politics and class struggles.

Some other diaspora people, the Jews, Parsis, and Armenians, came to Calcutta for trade and settled down. Gradually, they joined the colonial administrative elite. But on the contrary, the Chinese diaspora remained confined to a narrow range of trades in the city. The work also focuses on inter-community relations. The Chinese interacted with Bihari Muslims, Punjabi traders, Bengali clients, and Anglo-Indians in workspaces. However, social integration remained minimal. The Chinese gradually became interested in English. They began to send their children to the renowned English medium schools of the city, instead of the Chinese schools. In the educational institutions, the children came into contact with the boys and girls of other communities. However, the friendship remained limited in a sense that it often did not reach the level of frequent visit to the homes of each other (p.134). On the other hand, the relations with Indian workers were often strained, and sometimes confrontational. Bose cites detective department reports and even one report appeared in the *Dhumketu* magazine edited by famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (p. 132), revealing frequent tensions and physical confrontations in mixed workplaces.

The last chapter focuses on this diaspora community's efforts to assimilate. An Intelligence Bureau file noting reveals the participation of the Chinese in Rabindra Jayanti celebration (p.140). Similarly, the building of a Kali temple in Tangra indicates openness to local Hindu cultural traditions (p.140).

Undoubtedly, this book is a courageous attempt to capture the experience of Kolkata's Chinese community and it covers an extraordinary range of themes. Bose's work reminds us that diaspora histories are never linear. Their experiences are shaped by migrations, wars, adaptations, and dreams. With Kolkata's Chinese community at its heart, this work shows how to understand belonging, memory, and survival.