

When India Put Indians in Camps

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The internment of Chinese Indians during the Sino-Indian War of 1962 has contemporary echoes.

Andy Hsieh was a school student in Shillong, a town in northeast India, when he was suddenly arrested one day in 1962. His crime? He was of Chinese descent.

“The principal tried to intervene and told the officer he would personally guarantee his students’ safety... but the officer refused ...They had no choice. They had to go to jail,” write Joy Ma and Dilip D’Souza, the authors of *The Deoliwallahs*, an account of the internment of Chinese Indians following the 1962 war between India and China.

Hsieh, now a resident of Toronto, is one of several Chinese Indians who were incarcerated by the Indian state during the war.

The unexpected nature of the incarceration is evident from the advice that Hsieh recollects his school principal gave him before the police took them away: the final exam was only two weeks away. The principal told them, “Take all your books with you. You may be back in a week or so.”

But hopes of a quick release were soon dashed. Along with several hundred Indian citizens of Chinese descent, Hsieh was sent to a camp in Deoli in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. They would spend several years there, often with limited food and essentials, before being released.

Untold stories

The conflict between India and China, which broke out into a full-fledged war on 20 October 1962, was the culmination of a series of disputes between the two neighbouring countries over the shared border in the Himalaya. India had granted refuge to the Dalai Lama following the Tibetan uprising in 1959 and had also set up forward positions along its China border. China responded by invading India and overrunning much of the disputed territory.

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As the conflict unfolded concurrently with the Cuban Missile Crisis, India received little help from the USSR, and much less help than it expected from the US. The conflict ended when China declared a ceasefire just before midnight on 20 November 1962 and withdrew 20 kilometres behind the Line of Actual Control that existed between the two countries on 7 November 1959.

As the war, which proved to be disastrous for India, progressed and popular sentiment against the Chinese turned hostile, Indian citizens – men, women, and children – of Chinese descent were detained and deprived of means of livelihood. Some internees could leave after a few months at the camp, while others stayed years. Later, several were deported to China – a country with which they had only distant ancestral links.

Despite several excellent histories of the war that have been published in recent years, there is little to no conversation about the internment of Chinese Indians. This little-known episode in the history of independent India finds possibly its first focused written documentation in the book under review.

In her section of the preface, Ma – who was born in Deoli and now lives in the US – writes: “The Camp is something I lived with from the earliest moment... For us, the survivors of the interment... the stigma and effects have lasted a lifetime, made deeper by the lack of information about the incident. And the experience remains hard to forget no matter how far we have come.” Ma performs the unimaginably difficult task of not only negotiating her own past but also interviewing several other survivors.

The chapters authored by Ma are harrowing accounts of bureaucratic terrorism and nationalist bigotry, somewhat reminiscent of Svetlana Akexievich’s *Secondhand Time* or Haruki Murakami’s *Underground*. One only wishes she had used the first person instead of the third for these narratives to lend more intimacy to the voices.

Reading these pages, one can hardly ignore the parallel with the current political situation in India.

In his chapters, D’Souza, a Mumbai-based journalist and author, contextualises the episode by providing historical background about the presence of Chinese communities in India, the war between two of the largest Asian nations, and the aftermath of the conflict. Aided by official documents from both India and China, he provides useful information on the events in this period.

D’Souza’s meditations on the nation state, however, do not add much to an already rich literature on the subject, his thoughts already articulated by the likes of Benedict Anderson and Francis Fukuyama. Excluding the passages that explore the foundations of the nation state might, therefore, have made the book more focused.

What D’Souza does well, on the other hand, is tracing the legal framework that allowed India to imprison its citizens. He writes, “With the country... [in] war, President S Radhakrishnan promulgated the Defence of India Ordinance... It was specifically crafted to permit preventive detention during wartime...Crucially, on 13 November, India also amended its Foreigners Act, 1946.”

This amendment allowed the government to detain any person of ‘non-Indian’ origin, who was at birth a citizen of a country at war with India. A few days later, India also passed the Foreigners Law (Application and Amendment) Act, which defined a person in the 1946 Foreigners Act as someone whose parents or grandparents may have been at any time a citizen of a country at war with India. Then, in January 1963, it gazetted the Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order preventing people identified as foreigners from entering specified areas. This order explicitly restricted the movement of individuals of Chinese origin, defined broadly as any “person who, or either of whose parents, or any of whose grand-parents was at any time a Chinese national.”

Never again?

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Addressing an election rally in New Delhi in late December 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attacked the opposition for claiming that the government was planning to send Muslim citizens to detention camps if they failed to prove their citizenship. He was responding to the countrywide protests that had broken out earlier that month, soon after the Parliament – where Modi’s Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has an overwhelming 303 out of 543 seats – passed the

contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA.

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The government claims that the CAA aims to fast-track the citizenship of six religious minorities, excluding Muslims, from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, who entered India before 31 December 2014. Opposition leaders and social activists, however, argue that along with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR), the CAA will be used to further marginalise India’s approximately 200 million Muslims.

In the northeastern state of Assam, where the NRC was implemented under the guidance of the Supreme Court, several hundred people were imprisoned in detention camps for being unable to prove their citizenship. Former bureaucrat Harsh Mander, who investigated these camps as a Special Monitor of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), wrote about the harrowing conditions of the inmates – mostly poor Muslims – in his 2018 book, *Partitions of the Heart*. Elsewhere, Mander has written: “What we found at the detention centres is a condition of suffering and a great amount of distress. People at these centres were held for several years without work or recreation... According to international law, the maximum amount of time for detention can be 90 days which can be extended to six months. But detention at these centres in Assam seem to be indefinite.”

For the inmates at Deoli, too, detention had seemed indefinite; when they were finally released, they did not have businesses, jobs or homes to return to.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in India – the first case was reported in late January 2020 – attacks against citizens from the Northeast and people of Chinese origin have also been reported.

In the final chapter of the book under review, the authors write that those who are aware of what happened to the Chinese Indians in 1962 hope that “it’s something India would never do again.” Given contemporary developments, including reports of several new camps being constructed across the country, that hope seems to have remained just that – a hope. The authors of *The Deoliwallahs* write that the 1962-63 laws applying to ‘foreigners’ were used to target people who “looked Chinese”. In recent years, as India and China have yet again locked horns over border disputes, fears of members of the community have raised their heads again. These fears are only bound to worsen with the emergence of COVID-19 related stigma and skirmishes between the militaries of China and India along the Line of Actual Control, which resurfaced tensions between the two countries in May 2020.

People from India’s Northeast who look Chinese, are referred to as ‘Chinki’ an ethnic slur with a possible jail term – all over the country, and they have often faced discrimination and even violent attacks. The BJP has also used the idea of “looks” in recent times to attack detractors. In an election speech in Jharkhand, in December 2019, Modi said those creating violence during the anti-CAA protests could be identified by their clothes. The polarising statement was interpreted by many as aimed at Muslims. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in India – the first case was reported in late January 2020 – attacks against citizens from the Northeast and people of Chinese origin have also been reported.

The heavy silence

Ma observes how many internees are reluctant to talk about their experiences, some unwilling to

recollect the indescribable and others scared of the consequences. "Even today, not everyone is comfortable telling their story. It remains bottled up within their circles. Some ex-internees will not travel back to India. Others will not talk about it, turning away from the bad memories. Others are simply afraid." She also recollects reasons for her own long silence: "one of the reasons for my silence was the fear of rejection from my friends. The burden of our situation had been so heavy that I vacillated between confiding in them and rationalizing that I was not obliged to tell anyone anything. Having kept a secret so long made it that much harder to verbalize it".

The struggles of Ma and others reminds one of the struggles of Holocaust survivors who oscillated between the intense desire to write about their experience, like Primo Levi, or the non-negotiable silence that gripped many of his fellow survivors.

In an interview in January 2020, Italian Holocaust survivor, Liliana Serge - who was 13 years old when she was taken to Auschwitz in 1943 - said: "It was very difficult to find the right words to describe what we went through. It is almost impossible for those who had not experienced and suffered what we had to understand what we did, and the differences between us and them, coming back to a normal life... I decided that silence was the best choice. Heavy silence. It was not easy, but it was better than talking about it and not being understood."

If the reluctance of the survivors to speak of their traumatic pasts is one reason for the prevailing silence shrouding the episode, the other is forgetfulness.

In contrast, Primo Levi, who also survived Auschwitz, in an interview with *The New Republic* in 1986, said: "While I was in the camp the need to tell the story was so strong that I began to describe my experiences there, on the spot, in that German laboratory... As soon as I returned to Italy, I felt compelled to write, and within a few months I wrote *Survival in Auschwitz*. Some 15 years later, I wrote *The Reawakening*".

The camp at Deoli was definitely not like the hundreds of concentration and extermination camps set up by the Nazis across parts of Europe under their control. Yet, to be put into internment without having committed a crime, without trial, and without any possibility of redress, is likely to scar survivors.

Their burden is to not only rebuild their lives in the world outside the camp, to which they return as if almost resurrected, but also to recollect their memories. One can only imagine how traumatic this might be and can only be grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed by Ma. Yet, the few interviews in the book, as the author herself notes, must remind one of how many stories remain untold.

If the reluctance of the survivors to speak of their traumatic pasts is one reason for the prevailing silence shrouding the episode, the other is forgetfulness. "I consider myself a relatively aware Indian citizen," writes D'Souza, "perhaps even more aware of some Indian realities than many others around me". Yet, he confesses to being absolutely unaware of what had happened to Chinese Indians in 1962 till being told about it by a friend in March 2012.

He goes on to recollect visiting a popular Chinese restaurant in Bombay (Mumbai), in the 1960s, till its owner shut shop and emigrated to Canada. "Only decades later, long after losing touch with him... did my mother surmise that he was part of the exodus of Chinese-Indians in the wake of the Deoli incarceration." My own experiences are not dissimilar.

Having grown up in Kolkata, I have always been aware of people of Chinese origin who were my neighbours or friends. Close to my school in Park Circus was Tangra, often called Kolkata's

Chinatown, which hosted several Chinese restaurants in the area run by people of the community. The area was also notorious for the unmistakable smell of processed leather from the tanneries once found in Tangra. Boys from the area were my fellow students in school.

We also knew about Tiretta Bazaar in central Kolkata, settled by traders from the Hakka region of China in the late 18th or 19th century, and popular among those interested in having a 'Chinese' breakfast.

Meiyang Chang, an actor and singer of Chinese descent, became a household name in India after taking part in *Indian Idol* in 2007; he later went on to play Chinese characters in Bollywood films such as *Badmaash Company* (2010) and *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy* (2015). Yet, I was wholly unaware of the plight of Chinese Indians till I watched the BBC documentary, *The Legend of Fat Mama* (2003).

In recent years, the Chinese Indian community – many of them resettled in the West – have started to organise themselves to seek a formal apology from the Indian government for their unjust incarceration. They have been inspired by the Japanese American community in the US, who were similarly incarcerated during World War II and were later apologised to by the American government.

The reluctance of the Indian government to apologise to the Chinese Indian community, however, sits uneasily with the growing demands of many citizens worldwide seeking apologies for historical wrongs.

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