



A Geographical Appraisal of the Ethnic Enclave Economy of the Hakka Tanners of Kolkata, West Bengal

Kunaljeet Roy¹

Dr. Sukla Basu²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Geography, West Bengal State University

²Associate Professor, Department of Geography, West Bengal State University

Article Info

Article History

Received on:

15 February 2018

Accepted in Revised Form on:

31 July 2018

Available Online on and from:

23 September 2018

Key Words

Clusterisation

Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Peripheral Cluster

Space-emotion

Abstract

The clusterisation of specific ethnic business activities inside a city space offers a unique economic forum for cross-cultural interaction among employers- employees, sellers, and buyers belonging to different cultural groups. The continuous modification of urban landscape within and outside of these ethnic quarters can impose strong impact on the local street and residential morphology of the city. The case study research taken up by the authors in the present paper is about the Hakka tanning activities inside Tangra Chinatown in Kolkata. The tanning operations of the Hakka community still retain its peripheral cluster outfit since its inception. This peripheral location has helped these ethnic entrepreneurs to attract local customer base with their exclusive leather making techniques besides remaining isolated from the cut throat competition around the inner city for acquiring commercial space. The situation at present is not viable for the Hakka tanners with the verdict of the Supreme Court a decade earlier. Consequent to this, the relocation of units will lead to a permanent sacrifice of self proclaimed identity of unique business skills inherited for generations by this community. So, the intended focus of study is the understanding of the critical space-emotion psychology of these migrants and their economy addressing specific case of ethnic commerce. This paper also deals with a detailed spatial layout of commercial activities of the Hakka community and some alternative remedial measures to ease the tension raised by the situation concerned have been proposed. A mixed method research design has been applied: quantitatively and qualitatively in contextualising the research findings.

© 2018 ISSS. All Rights Reserved

Introduction

An ethnic economy simply denotes some sort of commercial ventures taken up by immigrant ethnic communities inside a geographical area. It represents the way how these communities interact with the existing commercial set up and create unique modification of entrepreneur landscape. The creation of ethnic commercial clusters within a city Chinatown, Little Italy, Little India, etc., reflects distinct spatial patterns of economic activity that shape the economic lives of its residents in both positive and negative ways (Coe, N.M. et al, 2007). Profit maximisation and cost minimisation is perhaps the basic market strategy in the establishment of a particular ethnic enterprise. Larger degree of distinctiveness and longer spatial outcomes with the host society leads to the formation of specific entrepreneurship within overseas Chinese enclave, both in the core functioning area, as well as towards the

peripheral segments of the city. The Chinatown of Kolkata is one such striking example of an ethnic enterprise based enclave with clear demarcations of racial and ethnic segregation in the commercial and cultural sphere of life.

Geographical space always plays a crucial role in shaping the ethnic economies. That is why minority enclaves offer residential segregation with which the enclave economies of the ethnic communities are connected with. As per Kaplan and Li (2006), in most cases the immigrant ethnic groups choose spaces of inner cities, down towns, suburbs or peripheral portions of the cities to establish their residential - cum - commercial ventures; maybe because of comparatively cheaper land rents. Another factor which Oxfeld (1993), had mentioned in her research on Tangra Chinatown is about racial segregation of urban space in the then Calcutta. As the Chinese tanner community deal with leather processing and slaughtering, the Hindu-Bengalee dominated city never

allowed space within the city core to establish such activities as these are regarded as impure as per popular religious belief. That's why we find the tanning activities are performed either by Hakka Chinese community or by upcountry Muslim community across the peripheral parts of city limits, i.e. Tangra, Topsia, Tiljala, Park Circus she stated.

Objectives

1. To understand the factors behind the formation of clustered peripheral ethnic economy at Tangra Chinatown.
2. To assess the situation of Chinese Tannery units with respect to spreading pollution & relocation dilemma.

Methodology

Reports of United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), Blacksmith Institute and reports on tannery pollution by other organizations are the secondary data sources. Google Earth Pro imageries of Tangra tanneries have also been utilized for the locational analysis related to the units. Primary field survey is the most crucial method of this study which began with a pilot study and further probed through participant observation from a qualitative perspective. This was juxtaposed through literally studying the individual tanning units inside the respective municipal wards. Thus a mixed method research design has been applied: quantitatively and qualitatively in contextualizing the research findings.

The Study Area

The Chinese tanning units were initially established around the Dhapa or Tangra area where marshy swamps provided ideal spot for tanning processes during the early half of 20th century. The area at present lies within the urban wards of 58 and 66 respectively, under the aegis of Borough No. 7 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation. It is aligned with the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass at the eastern side and J.B.S Haldane Avenue, Dhapa Road and G.C. Khatick Roads are bordering the southern, northern and western sides respectively. The Tangra Chinatown is well connected with rest of the city through these road networks and with the suburbs by Sealdah Railway station (connected through G.C. Khatick Road and Beliaghata Road to the west). The E.M. Bypass at the eastern fringe of the Chinatown provides easy connectivity with the newly created leather hub of Bantala on one side and Kolkata International Airport on the other. The growing importance of this area within Calcutta (Kolkata) made way for prospectus commercial benefits for these Chinese leather merchants.

Historical Background of the Study Area

The tanning operations inside the city is found highly racialized and the selection of tanning spaces were driven by non availability of access inside the core city. The core-periphery connection for leather processing in Kolkata is unique which is most often regarded as 'Backward linkage' of industry coined by Watkins (1963). A 'Backward linkage' occurs when the demands of an industry leads to the establishment of other industries to produce for the needs of

this industry.

The Hakka community has their ancestral origin of Guangdong (Kwangtung) province in southern China. Here 'Hakka' denotes the dialect they speak which is regarded as one of the purest forms of Chinese traditional dialects. In Cantonese terms, 'Hakka' mean guest people. This is because the Hakka community is found as the major migratory group among overseas Chinese who successfully established entrepreneurial niche across continents. In the then Calcutta, the Hakka community separated themselves to some extent from the existing Chinese niche of Turret Bazaar at the central city and moved to the peripheral portions around the early half of 20th century.

The first Chinese tannery was established in 1902 named as the Fu Shien Tannery, which adopted traditional vegetable tanning operations. Later, the Chinese tanneries shifted from vegetable tanning to chrome based chemical tanning processes for large scale preparations. During inter World War period (1919-45) the demand for leather goods rose excessively high, which fostered the Chinese tanning operations in Calcutta. The number of Hakka tannery units rose from 9 in 1918 to 297 around 1980's (Oxfeld, 2007). However since 1992, with the Supreme Court verdict regarding the relocation of tannery units from Tangra, the Chinese leather units faced a great blow and the once flourishing business practically started dwindling. Some of the tannery units continue their operation with smaller scales of production but a major portion converted their tanneries into restaurants. A few tannery units shifted their operations to Bantala leather hub. So a detailed analysis of how this clusterisation of economy has grown in the last nine decades and what phases they have gone through on account of structural transformation of the entire leather business of the community is required.

Hakka Entrepreneurship: a core-periphery analysis

Following Oxfeld's (1993, 2007), first possible attempt to portray the residential cum commercial life of Kolkata Hakka community; a series of quality deliberations have made their way towards enriching the analysis of Hakka economic patterns inside the multi-racial city. Scholars like Liang (2007), Bonerjee (2010) and Xing and Sen (2013), applied their research skills on the assessment of unique Hakka economic- cum- social neighbourhood of Tangra. The movement from the core (central Kolkata) to the periphery of the city in its early days led to the formation of this another ethnic enclave, predominantly a Hakka neighbourhood; based on the occupational niches of earlier waves of migrants of this community (Basu, 2016).

Today this area is a self contained urban enclave of the Hakkas as the tanneries don't depend on people from other communities (cited by Paul Chung in his interview clippings in Mukherjee and Gooptu (2009), giving an insular image with its high walls and a more suburban location. The authors of this paper have tried to draw the sketch of the flow of information from their research for analysing the factors behind the growth of peripheral Hakka tanning cluster at the study area.

The initial reason behind the establishment of Tangra tanneries

are the caste and religious notion. All the scholars agreed that associated notion of purity and sanctity of some particular space sometimes pushes some specific activities to move towards the periphery. In everyday interactions we see that a fish market or an animal slaughtering unit does not lie aligned with any sacred space like temple, mosque etc. So, the notions of purity can play a delicate role in shaping the form of urban space fabrication. This has also been the case for these tannery units.

As per Oxfeld (2007), there was a connection between the choice of livelihood for the Hakka community and the formation of their ethno-commercial identity. She in this context emphasized on those certain conditions which entail the community members to stick on to their cohesive community sense for maintaining their identities. From that, a set of images begin to build among the particular ethnic group to identify their traits, rituals, identity formation in everyday sphere of interaction within or outside the community. Oxfeld (2007), quoted Fredrik Barth (1969), regarding the creation of ethnic boundaries maintained by Kolkata Hakka community. They used to hire 'Bihari' 'Chamars' (cobblers) for processing of raw leather which they bought from the 'upcountry' Muslims living around Park Circus slaughtering hub. The Hakka tanners also hired Nepalese or Gurkha people as security or gate keepers for their units. Usually the capital for tanning operations come from the family and supply of necessary expertise regarding operations supplied from the co-ethnic pool of skilled persons within their domain. So to recognise the pattern of Hakka tannery business, it may be useful to portray the following pyramidal structure. However, these Hakka merchants never ever allowed the non-Hakka employees to enter into any of their restricted cluster of community activities. So, this makes a clear sense of preservation of boundaries by the Hakka Chinese. Both Oxfeld (1993, 2007) and Liang (2007), pointed on the job of Hakka tanners as some sort of 'culturally polluted' as leather processing is regarded as the impure job for these so called 'untouchables' as per existing rigid caste philosophy prevailing among a large section of the country then.

The Hakka community found a profitable niche to create a monopoly of leather tanning inside an 'elite Hindu' then dominated city like Calcutta. They adopted a twofold strategy of business management:

First, *they created a peripheral enclave of residential-cum-commercial enterprises keeping leather processing outside majority 'elite Hindu' neighbourhood of inner city. Closer proximity between Tangra and Park Circus also helped them to acquire cheap source of raw skins and hides and the vicinity of the slums of Tiljala supplied them the necessary pool of 'chaamar' workers.*

Secondly, *the shoe shops owned by Hakka community were established at Rabindra Sarani- Bentinck Street crossing adjacent to the Tiretta Bazaar (old Chinese residential area) at inner city. This is because the shoe shops need to have a local customer base and henceforth need central location for retail business benefits. This connection between the Hakka shoe shops and tannery units thus resemble a 'Backward manufacturing linkage'*

as per Watkins (1963). When the Hakka Chinese community realised that they would never return to their ancestral lands in China they were determined to establish profitable niche in the leather market economy inside the city. They brought their family members and acquaintances from China and started a residentially segregated economic venture. They created unique linear market morphology of shoe shops aligned with Bentinck Street- Rabindra Sarani stretch crossing Bow Bazaar, Lal Bazaar towards Chitpore. The location is just 5-6 kilometres from Tangra tanneries. So supply of quality leather from tanneries owned by co-ethnic members became the major policy of Chinese shoe making.

Xing and Sen (2013) by citing Yu (1956), mentioned about 140 shoe shops along the said stretch within which 30 units are large enough to occupy a major chunk of shoe business in the city during 1950's. Actually, the huge requirement of leather products before and during Second World War (1939-45) in the subcontinent opened the window for the Hakka entrepreneurs to increase their profit conveniently at the global shoe market. This trend continued till 1980's, during the Cold War periods as well. Hence the Hakka Chinese community became affluent in leather processing and thus they formed cohesive ethnic economy which made a parallel business setup inside the mainstream economy of the city.

The variation of caste, creed and ethnicity among groups in Kolkata resulted into spatial segregation among them. Berry and Rees (1969), mentioned that in the city of Calcutta, the occupational variations existing between ethnic groups exceed the level of variation within themselves. So, the difference between ethnic and racial groups created strong occupational demarcation: these so called social boundaries sometimes are reflected through the process of social separation (Oxfeld, 2007). This results into further residential cum commercial segregation among minority ethnic communities from the mainstream core living area. Thus, peripherality became evident for the Hakka tanners as well. If we take the cartographic illustration by Berry and Rees (1969) depicting the social areas of Calcutta (after applying the method of Social Area Analysis proposed by Shevky and Bell (1955)), we can clearly identify the spatial segregation among cultural groups in the city (fig.4).

The eastern and south eastern parts of the then Calcutta as seen in this map were the residences (quarters) of the lower class Bengalees and upcountry Muslims and Bihari cobbler clans. Thus, it's quite clear from the segregation boundaries modified after the social area analysis by Berry and Rees that the Hakka tanners chose the residential areas inhabited by the lower class Indians to establish their second operational sphere inside the city initially because of the notion of impurity discussed earlier. However there are more reasons traced by Oxfeld (2007), regarding the selection of peripheral city space, as:

1. Dhapa or Tangra at that time (during 1910) was a marshy, swampy area which catered to the basic need of fresh water supply for tanning operations.
2. Apart from it, the peripheral location offered cheap land rent for the Hakka community to set up a low cost fortified

settlement.

Layout of Tannery operation in Tangra Chinatown

The structural operation of tannery units at Tangra has changed over time. Initially the Hakka tanners only processed raw hide and skin which later they converted into vegetable tanning units. After the war periods, they converted their tanning processes into chrome based chemical tanning and the processing units became larger than before.

1. Primary processing of Raw hide and skin (1902-30)
2. Vegetable Tanning (1931-50)
3. Chrome based Tanning (1951 onwards)

Most of the tanneries process sheep, goat, cow hides and skins in Tangra. They practice vegetable tanning using barks, nuts, vegetable tan extract but mostly chrome tanning using Basic Chromium Sulphate (BCS) and other chemicals. The processing of wet salted hides/skins may be grouped into four major categories namely:

1. Processing of wet or dry salted hides/skins into vegetable tanned semi-finished leather
2. Processing of wet or dry salted hides and skins into chrome tanned semi finished leather.
3. Processing of wet or dry salted hides and skins into finished leather.
4. Processing of vegetable tanned semi-finished leather and/or chrome tanned semi finished leather to finished leather.

The locations of the units are mostly along South Tangra Road and a few along Matheshwartala Road. During visits, we found that some of the units are now either not in operation or have shifted to the newly built Kolkata Leather Complex at Bantala, within two kilometers from Tangra. Units like Fu Sheen Tannery (59 Matheshwartala Road), Shui Yuan Tannery (44/5, Matheshwartala Road) and a few more have already relocated their tanning activities to this Kolkata Leather Complex.

The temporal and spatial analysis of tannery units inside Tangra Chinatown is important to assess the pattern of growth and distribution. Temporal assessment of Tangra tannery units depicts both the phases of growth as well as their lapse. During initial periods, the numbers of tanning operations were limited. Because of inter war demand of leather products, unprecedented growth of Hakka leather ventures were seen which remained so until the environmental concern established through the strong Court verdict for permanent closure of tanning operations or relocating to a separate space. The growth pattern of last 100 years for Tangra tanneries indicates towards a rapid increase in number for first six decades of tannery operations (1918-1980). This period experienced meteoric increase of leather products due to World Wars.

However spatial growth and spread of Chinese leather operations remained clustered inside the fortified structures of Hakka households. The tannery units inside Chinatown are mostly situated around Matheshwartala Road, South Tangra Road and a few have shifted their manufacturing units to Calcutta Leather Complex (Bantala) respectively. Being fortified a fishy outlook, a space more imagined from outside compared to reality by the non Chinese people living in the

vicinity towards this Hakka entrepreneurial pattern. Thus a sense of 'otherness' buzz around Tangra regarding the Hakka community's way of life and so they got segregated from mainstream life of the city.

At present the tannery units of Tangra Chinatown are either shut down or converted into restaurants. Some of the units have already shifted to Calcutta Leather Complex at Bantala. This is because of the Supreme Court Verdict in context of M.C. Mehta v/s Union Govt. case regarding the pollution of Ganges due to tannery effluents in Kanpur. Due to this verdict, the tannery units in Tangra had to shift its entire operations at the city skirts i.e Bantala. Blacksmith Institute of New York conducted a detailed survey in 2007 with the financial support of Asian Development Bank (ADB), regarding the status of polluted places in India and possible effects of those on society. They have classified the major polluted places within two different categories:

1. Areas with highest needed intervention
2. Intervention with no priority

Tangra Chinatown has been listed in the second category where the field assessments of the experts are about the concerns of open street drains containing toxic effluents coming out of the tanning units. The colour of the liquid shows typical chromate blue. It leads to contamination of local groundwater levels by adding chromium content to it. During our field visits, we have observed the deteriorating sewage and drainage conditions of the site. The open gutters carry chunks of tanning residues and waste water coming out of those tanneries which may contain toxic elements. It is the responsibility of the municipal authorities to look into the sewage and drainage improvements as these are listed among basic urban services it offers to its citizens.

The Relocation Dilemma

The situation is critically vulnerable and complex since the Hakka tannery units are family ownership based small to medium industrial units; and are coupled with clustered residential spaces. Most of the Hakka tanners are not willing to shift their units outside Chinatown as it may loosen their co-ethnic bonding of sectoral entrepreneurship which they nourished for nearly a century. So the cycle of dilemma is in the following fashion:

Now the question needs probing is over the attitude of the Hakka Chinese entrepreneurs regarding the ban of leather making inside Tangra Chinatown. The diagram indicates towards a psycho-social apathy of the Hakka community to relocate their production units outside Chinatown. This signifies the notion of emotional attachment between a community and their living place. Tuan (1977), mentioned about place as the centre of power as well as how a space transforms into meaningful place through the operation of public symbols. Territorial specialisation and fragmentation of specialised activity creates powerful emotional bonding with the cultural landscape. The residential set up of the Hakka community with fortification symbolizes the idea of 'spatial differentiation'. Here the immigrant ethnic group is compelled to accommodate specialized skills within core ethnic clustered space which created a unique way of parallel leather economy.

Certainly, they will never leave the opportunity of becoming 'exclusive'. So, before thinking of relocation of Chinese tanneries, the authority needs to rethink about this emotional attachment between Tangra and living quarters of Hakka community.

Conclusion

Mudu (2006), in context of immigrant business activities in Rome, Italy pointed towards the crisis of identity among overseas ethnic entrepreneurs within the core frame of multinational business framework. The Chinese in every overseas business network act as reconstructors of symbolising self identity by imposing their traditional motifs, symbols and alphabets in their every business unit. Whether it is Sydney Chinatown (Collins, 2006) or Tangra (Calcutta) Chinatown, it remains as the main site of community interactions, ethnic festivals like annual lion dance or dragon boat races. However the ethnic economy of Tangra at present is lying on the verge of permanent closure as it is being turned into a marginal utility space. Urban policy makers need construct separate revitalisation strategies for exclusive ethnic clusters. They may not resemble with the pace of gentrification of inner city but these ethnic landscapes can modify the urban morphology on local scales. This may contain joint commercial cum cultural ethnic Chinese quarters in Tangra. Some specific compensation packages may be offered to the Hakka entrepreneurs regarding relocation of their tannery units to Bantala leather complex. There lies a third possibility of granting some vacant spaces to them for establishing a new ethno- commercial cluster like Tangra where they can create ethnic shopping malls like that of Toronto Chinatown (Lo, 2006) where over 65 Chinese malls around Scarborough, Richmond Hill and Mississauga lie within the residential cluster of modified ethnic chain commercial venture. This model can be beneficiary for Tangra as well. On one hand it can offer substitute space for Chinese entrepreneurs to rebuild their tanning units and on the other a parallel Chinese 'chain' of malls can offer exclusive ethnic goods to city residents. It may also foster the growth of manufacturing potential of the city in near future.

References

- Basu, S (2016): Everyday lived spaces of the Chinese community in central Kolkata, *Hill Geographer*, 32(1), pp 87-104
- Berry, B.J.L and Rees, P.H (1969): The factorial Ecology of Calcutta, *American Journal of Sociology*, 74 (5), pp 445-491
- Bonnerjee, J.J (2010): Neighbourhood, City, Diaspora- Identity and belonging for Calcutta's Anglo-Indian and Chinese communities, Thesis published by Queen Mary University, London, England, 241 p, accessed through the web link <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/400> on 24th March, 2016
- Coe, N.M, Kelly, P.F and Yeung, H.W.C (2007): *Economic Geography- A Contemporary introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, England, 456p
- Collins, J (2006): Ethnic Diversity and the Ethnic Economy in Cosmopolitan Sydney, in Kaplan, D and Li, W, (ed): *Landscapes of The Ethnic Economy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Plymouth, England, pp 135-148
- Kaplan, D and Li, W, (ed), (2006): *Landscapes of The Ethnic Economy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Plymouth, England, 224p
- Liang, J (2007): Migrational patterns and occupational specializations of Calcutta Chinese- an insider's history, *China Report*, 43(2), pp 397-410
- Lo, L (2006): Changing Geography of Toronto's Chinese Ethnic Economy in Kaplan, D and Li, W, (ed): *Landscapes of The Ethnic Economy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Plymouth, England, pp 83-96
- Mudu, P (2006): The New Romans- Ethnic Economic Activities in Rome in Kaplan, D and Li, W, (ed): *Landscapes of The Ethnic Economy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Plymouth, England, pp 165- 176
- Mukherjee, S and Goopu, S (2009): The Chinese Community of Calcutta- An interview with Paul Chung in Banerjee, H, Gupta, N and Mukherjee, S (ed): *Calcutta Mosaic-Essays and Interviews on the Minority communities of Calcutta*, Anthem Press, New Delhi, India, pp 130-141
- Oxford, E (2007): Still Guest People- The Reproduction of Hakka identity in Kolkata, India, *China Report*, 43(2), pp 411-435
- Oxford, E (1993): *Blood, Sweat and Mahjong- Family and Enterprise in an Overseas Chinese community*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, U.S.A, 291p
- Tuan, Y. F (1977): *Space and Place The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, U.S.A, 235p
- Watkins, M.H (1963): A Staple theory of economic growth, *The Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 29(2), pp 141-158
- Xing, Z and Sen, T (2013): The Chinese in South Asia in Tan, C.B (ed): *Routledge Handbook of The Chinese Diaspora*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, New York, U.S.A, pp 205-226

Table- 1- Temporal Analysis of Tannery units inside Tangra Chinatown

Year	1918	1980	2017
Number of Hakka tannery units in Tangra	09	297	55

Source: Oxford (2007), ICA Yellow Pages (2017)

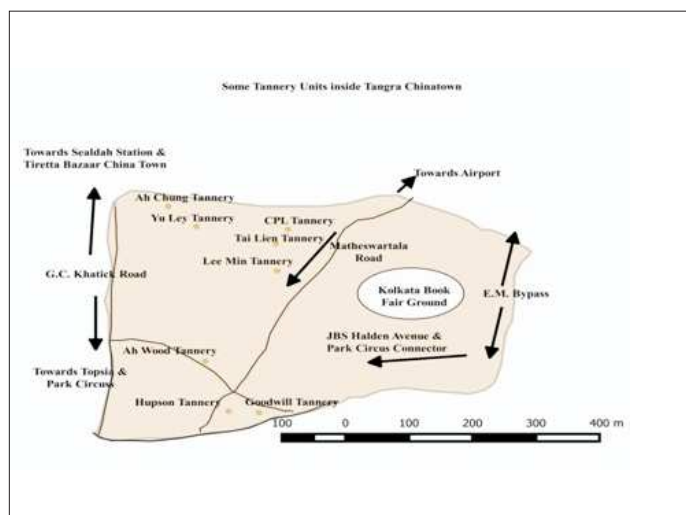


Fig. 1: Location of the Study Area

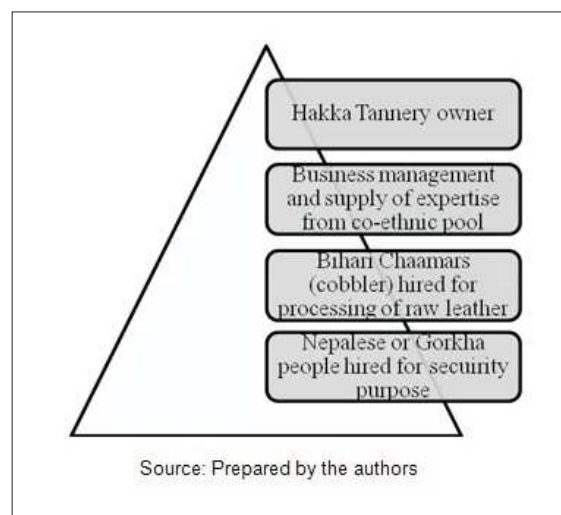


Fig. 2: Hierarchical structure of Hakka Tannery units

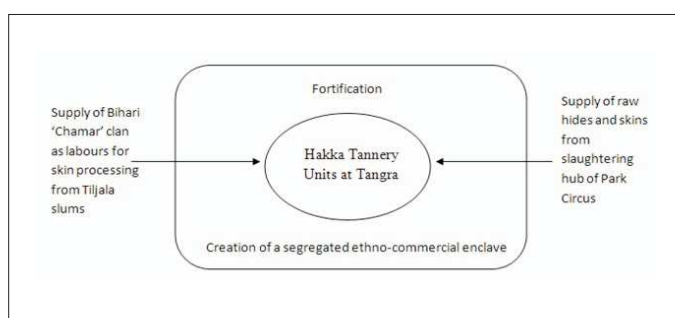


Fig. 3: 2-fold Strategy of the Hakka Tannery Business

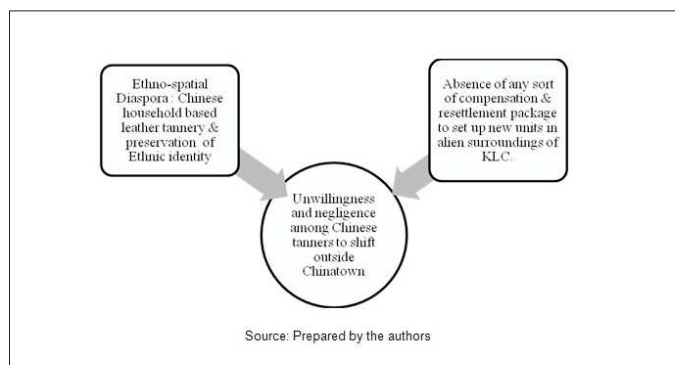


Fig. 5: Dilemma of Hakka Tanners

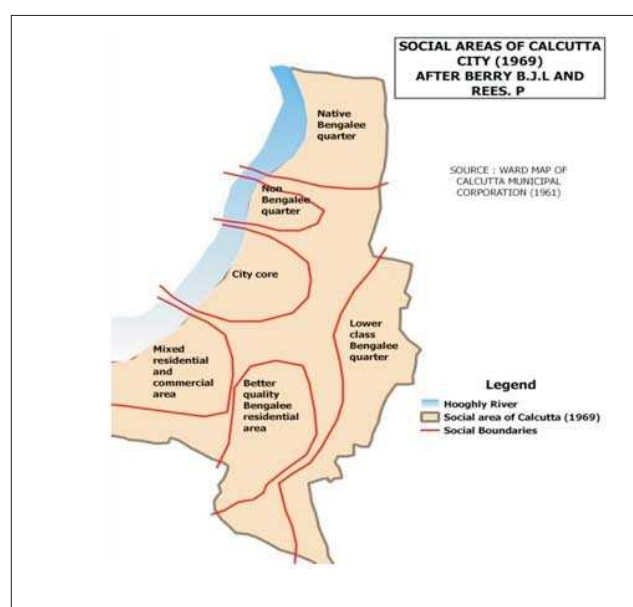


Fig. 4: Social Areas of Calcutta



Kunaljeet Roy¹
Research Scholar, Department of Geography
West Bengal State University
Email id: kunaljeetroy@gmail.com

www.h-net.org/.....ID=201577



Dr. Sukla Basu²
Associate Professor, Department of Geography
West Bengal State University
Email id: dr.basusukla@gmail.com

Advanced Science Index...ID=1260