

Will India’s Chinese finally get justice?

Efforts are under way to persuade New Delhi to acknowledge persecution of citizens after the 1962 border war, writes **Maseeh Rahman**



Forty-eight years after China declared a unilateral ceasefire to end the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict, an extraordinary event took place this month in India’s northeastern state of Assam.

A group of ethnic Chinese were felicitated as “fellow Indians” by the people of Makum, a small town nestling amid Assam’s famed tea gardens, and much regret was expressed for their inhuman treatment by the government after the border war.

In 1962, Assam was part of a larger administrative zone that lay at the intersection of three countries – India, China and Myanmar. Befitting its geographical location, Makum was a unique town – it had a large and thriving Chinese community.

The community dated back to the 1830s, when the British smuggled some workers along with tea saplings out of China to establish Assam’s premier plantation business.

Over the next century, the booming tea industry became a magnet for migrants from China, and many eventually started

successful businesses of their own. “My grandfather set up a timber sawmill and our family became very prosperous manufacturing railway sleepers,” Wang Shing Tung, 52, recalls.

“We owned cars, trucks and even elephants, and top district officials would salute my father, addressing him as ‘Cheena Sahib’ [Chinese boss].”

But calamity struck just as the ceasefire was declared on November 20, 1962. Overnight, “Cheena Sahib” became “Dirty Cheena”. At least two-thirds of Assam’s more than 1,500 Chinese were indiscriminately rounded up under a draconian law, forced to abandon their possessions, and transported thousands of kilometres to an internment camp at Deoli in the northwestern state of Rajasthan.

“Though the ethnic Chinese were settled in Assam for long, the border conflict provoked a general fear that they could become a fifth column for the People’s Liberation Army,” says Mohan Guruswamy, an expert on Sino-India ties.

Hundreds more were arrested in other parts of India. The Association of India Deoli Camp Internees says altogether 3,000 Chinese were confined behind barbed wire in Rajasthan. Some had Chinese passports, some were illegal immigrants, but many,

How could the government treat us like spies? We ate the bread and salt of this land. How could we become traitors?

Wang Shing Tung, 52, a Chinese resident in Assam

like Wang, were from families that had become fully assimilated – they had married locally, spoke the local language and were Indian citizens.

First the internment and persecution and then the deportation of a majority of inmates to southern China devastated and divided hundreds of Chinese families.

“How could the government treat us like spies?” Wang asks. “We ate the bread and salt of this land. How could we become traitors?”

“My younger sister died of fever as the camp had only a basic dispensary. There was no school, so I couldn’t study. It was total misery, and my mother still doesn’t want to talk about it, though my father, who died this year, would say, ‘Why be afraid? Talk about what happened.’”

His family was released in 1966, but further trauma awaited them on their return to Assam. They had been reduced to paupers. Their house and sawmill had been stripped bare, and everything they possessed, including the trucks, elephants and a safe containing money and gold, was missing. It had either been looted or auctioned as “enemy property”.

A similar fate befell all the other returnees. Ho Kok Meng, 70, whose grandfather was a tea garden mechanic and whose father set up a car workshop, found everything stolen or destroyed. The family of Paul Leong, 54, part of the last batch to be released from Deoli, in 1968, returned to Shillong (now in Meghalaya state) to find their house and restaurant had been auctioned. They were given 60 rupees as the sales proceeds. “My father had organised donations for India’s war effort, yet he was interned,” Leong says.

Ho Wailai’s engineer father was taken away at night shortly before he was to marry a Chinese girl from Calcutta. He returned to Makum five years later to find his business gone. But his fiancée had remained faithful. “My father had to start again from scratch making diesel generators,” the 40-year-old says. “There

used to be a lot of hostility, and my parents had a very difficult life.”

The trauma suffered by India’s Chinese people is comparable to the experience of the Japanese interned in the US after the Pearl Harbour attack. In 1988 Washington apologised and disbursed US\$1.6 billion in reparations to the victims. In India, however, Deoli and its aftermath has remained a dark secret for nearly 50 years.

A public drive has started now to get New Delhi to make amends. A novel in the Assamese language published in April first highlighted the persecution of the Chinese (see accompanying story). The Canada-based association of Deoli internees wrote to Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in August appealing for a monument at Deoli to honour the Chinese who lost their lives and their freedom. And the meeting at Makum this month generated extensive media coverage of a buried chapter of India’s recent history.

Since 1962, a majority of India’s Chinese have dispersed abroad. But about 500 still live in Assam and Meghalaya. Through enterprise and diligence, many have rebuilt their lives and businesses – Ho Wailai manufactures machines for processing teak; Wang and his siblings run a restaurant and three beauty parlours where the sawmill once stood; Ho Kok Meng’s son owns a small tea garden; and Leong, who married an Indian, is among the wealthy of Shillong – he owns a sports shop, a restaurant, a Hyundai car dealership and a large tract of land.

“There’s less hostility today, but the insider-outsider feeling remains,” Ho Wailai says. “There’s an underlying sense of anxiety and fear, especially among the older generation.”

“Many of us are doing well, and we’re happy again,” Leong adds. “But some families in Assam are still in a pathetic condition. The government should try to help them, give them a decent livelihood.”

There has been no response from New Delhi as yet.

Love blossoms in war

The Assamese boy falls in love with the Chinese girl. He works as a clerk in a tea company; she is a homemaker.

The boy marries the girl against his father’s wishes. Suddenly, a Sino-India war breaks out. As the People’s Liberation Army advances, there’s fear and panic in Assam, northeastern India. Even as China declares a ceasefire, Indian police go round arresting Chinese living in the countryside.

The boy’s father tips off the police about his Chinese daughter-in-law. She is taken away to the northwestern state of Rajasthan. She’s pregnant, and delivers in an internment camp in subhuman conditions.

Mother and child are deported to a state farm in southern China. After some time they are smuggled into Hong Kong. The woman succeeds in contacting her husband in Assam. The couple are finally reunited in Hong Kong.

This is the story of *Makam*, a 600-page novel in the Assamese language that was published in April and is already in its fifth edition. “It’s entirely based on facts,” the author Rita Chowdhury says. “I have met the couple in Hong Kong, it’s their story.”

She spent four years researching her novel, travelling to Nepal, Hong Kong and mainland China to meet the Chinese who were removed from Assam after the 1962 border conflict. *Makam* exposes how Indian Chinese were persecuted by the state.

Now she is campaigning to ensure the survivors won’t undergo the trauma again. “Most Indian Chinese in Assam are still very scared; they don’t want to talk about what happened in 1962,” she says. “It is for other Indians to reassure them that they’re safe. The government of India should apologise to the ethnic Chinese. But I don’t want to ask for that, I don’t want to challenge the state. I do feel however that the government should ... express sympathy.”

Maseeh Rahman



Assamese writer Rita Chowdhury (centre, in sari) with Li Su Chen (above and top), 83, and others attend a meeting to reassure Assamese Chinese they are fully accepted as Indian citizens. Li’s son Wang Shing Tung (right) runs a restaurant called Hong Kong. Photos: Ishan Tankha



Kashmiri rapper sings of freedom from India

KASHMIR

Associated Press in Srinagar

If you ask MC Kash, he’s just speaking the truth. But the songs of Kashmir’s breakout rapper court rebellion and could land him in jail.

Kash calls himself a rebel who uses sharp rhymes and beats instead of stones or guns to protest against India’s rule over the mostly Muslim region in the Himalayas.

Kash, 20, whose real name is Roushan Illahi, has won a fan base among Kashmir’s youth, whose summer uprising against Indian rule inspired his local hit *I Protest*.

The lyrics – “Tales from the dark side of a murderous regime, an endless occupation of our land an’ our dreams” – tread dangerously close to sedition in India, where questioning the country’s claim to the disputed region of Kashmir is illegal.

“Rap is about straight talk and telling truth in the face, however uncomfortable it may be,” the rapper says on a gloomy autumn day in the region’s capital, Srinagar. “Rap is rebellion. Kashmir is

rebellion. MC Kash is rebellion against injustice, oppression and falsehood.”

He admits he was scared last month after remarks by Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy questioning India’s claim to Kashmir generated angry demands for her arrest. “Then I thought, revolutionaries don’t fear persecution or execution. If they throw me in the prison ... I’ll write on the [prison] walls.”

Authorities deny going after those who are using the internet or music as an outlet for their protests, saying their focus instead is on street protesters who hurl stones at law enforcement officers.

Both India and Pakistan claimed sovereignty over Kashmir when they were divided at the end of British rule in 1947. Since then, India has governed most of the territory and Pakistan holds much of the rest. Stuck in the middle of the dispute are Kashmir’s 10 million people, and for many, anti-India sentiment runs deep after decades of violent turmoil.

Separatist insurgencies and crackdowns by the hundreds of thousands of Indian troops deployed in the Indian-administered portion have killed more than 68,000, most of them civilians.

Since June, tens of thousands of Kashmiris have risen up against Indian rule again. At least 111 – mostly teenage boys and young men – have died in the five months of clashes with government forces, and hundreds more have been arrested.

Kash grew up with his physician father and schoolteacher mother in Srinagar at a time when India’s army was hammering the region to crush a rebellion that erupted in 1989.

“People like Illahi are a new generation of Kashmiri artists who have experienced enough fear not to be intimidated any more,” local sociologist Wasim Bhat says.

There is a long tradition in Kashmir of writing protest songs, but they are usually in the local Urdu and Kashmiri languages and so do not have much impact outside the region. There is even a popular, rap-like genre of traditional Kashmiri folk music called *ladi shah*, in which artists go from village to village to sing about contemporary issues.

But Kash says he chooses to rap in English because “I wanted the world to know what’s happening in Kashmir”.

He started writing poetry at 10, and now studies business administration in a

college in Srinagar. Using his own money, he went to a local studio last year and with a computer recorded his first rap song, *Moment of Truth*, after watching a film on the 2008-09 Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza.

“I cried and cried” because the same thing “was happening here in my land”, Kash says.

Since June, authorities in Kashmir have imposed rigid curfews as separatist leaders

call for more strikes and protests. Kash made his third song, *I Protest*, in September.

“I thought about these young martyrs and their mothers, and then I thought to put this pain of Kashmir in music,” he says.

The result was a highly political and emotional song naming the 65 people killed up to September, and saying “these killings ain’t random, it’s an organised

genocide”. He released the song on the online music site ReverbNation, where his profile photograph shows a crew-cut youth wearing a red-hooded sweat shirt and a tough expression.

The song rails against “a murderous oppression written down in police brutality” and vows “I’ll throw stones an’ neva run. I protest, until my freedom has come!”

It was an instant hit with Kashmiri students, some of whom combined the song with videos and photos on YouTube and Facebook.

Kash was not arrested, but police raided the recording studio and questioned staff about his whereabouts, according to one worker who refused to be named for fear of police reprisal.

The studio will not let Kash record his new song, also about Kashmir. He says he is looking for other outlets, including possibly a local concert with Indian rappers.

But already within Kashmir, Kash has inspired a handful of other youths to start rapping, recording hip hop compositions on home computers and connecting with artists outside the region.



MC Kash belts out another of his rebel songs at a studio in Srinagar. Photo: AP