

An Ethnographic Profile of the Tamil Settlers in a City of West Bengal, India

Avik Roy*, Gopalkrishna Chakrabarti**, Arnab Das***

Abstract: *This article intends to explore the processes involved in the production and sustained expression of ethnic identity of the Tamil Brahman settlers at an urban locality of Howrah (a district of Indian state of West Bengal). Much of the works on ethnicity have been rooted in understanding issues like inequalities, inclusion/exclusion and negotiation within and between communities. The emergent focus on the external process defining identity as an imposition on a minority/less powerful group by the majority/ more powerful, cannot deny the consequence of internal agency of any ethnic group as a similar process. The ethnographic observations and interviews for nearly nine months of fieldwork with the author in the role of an observer as participant in the daily life of the group focus more on the internal processes than on the external ones. The production and maintenance of religiously symbolizing markers of identity are strongly internalized and negotiated for the sake of perpetuating a sense of supremacy associated with caste notions of purity and pollution among the Brahman Tamil settlers in the city. The author concludes that in addition to the religious sphere, there are other means of celebrating and reinforcing the identity to ensure a sense of belonging, cohesion and easy mutual understanding among the members of the group.*

Introduction

The term "ethnic" is commonly used to refer to a group that differs from others in terms of *culture* (either immigrant and/or non-immigrant), *nationality*, *race*, or even *religion* (Bader 2001). Research on ethnic identity focuses on descriptions, expression, narratives or discourse, and ethnic experience (Gordon 1964; Alba 1990; Waters 1990, 1999; Phinney 1991; Jacobson 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). It considers ethnic self-identity, ethnic salience, symbolic ethnicity, social preference, social meaning, as well as social significance (Baumann 1999).

Some of the work focuses on perceptions of self-identity, perceptions of social identity, social preference, social meaning, social significance, and social category membership; while other work explores various identification patterns, the existence of hyphenated identities, as well as the phenomenon of transnational identity (Halter 2000).

The literature includes material on ethnic origin or heritage, the homeland, traditional culture, value orientations, ethnic norms and ethnic subculture. Much of the work, however, tends to focus on the migration/emigration/immigration, settlement experiences, adaptation strategies, and group survival of these immigrant populations. Particular attention is given to acculturation models or strategies (assimilation, integration, marginalization, segregation) pursued by various ethnic groups within a context of cultural diversity as well as differences in acculturation processes within an ethnic group (Ogbu 1991). Some examines the construction of an ethnic category as an embodied phenomenon (Alba 2014). Nowadays the investigation focuses on what creates the ethnic difference between the minority and the majority populations, the ethnic boundary as an embodied question (Valkonen 2014). Strategies pursued by specific ethnic groups also receive

* Senior Research Fellow (UGC-NET), Dept. of Anthropology, University of Calcutta.

** Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Calcutta.

*** Associate Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Calcutta.

attention, and include the establishment of ethnic enclaves, ethno-specific recreational activities, and the process of ethnic regeneration. Language, language preferences or abilities and language retention are also examined (Portes and Zhou 1993). Most, however, use ethnic groups as the main unit of analysis, only sometimes making reference to within group differences¹. Theories of social identity, developed by Tajfel (1981), Turner (1987), and others, emphasize the importance of collective membership and the significant effects that group membership can have on behaviour. These behaviours include feelings of attraction toward members of the in-group, stereotypic judgments of out-group members, social influence, and preferential treatment toward the in-group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner, 1987).

A number of investigators have shown that the need for an expression of social identity is not static. Brewer (1991), for example, found that the motivation to claim group membership depends on the competing needs for inclusiveness and uniqueness, whereby people seek an optimal level of distinctiveness in their choice of a collective. What particular identity is claimed can depend on situational cues that make an identity salient or that fit with one's own priorities (Deaux & Major, 1987; Oakes, 1987).

Although the presentation of self may be quite variable, it can also be argued that the self-concept is generally stable across time. Individuals not only view themselves and others in consistent terms, but they actively create social situations that support their views of themselves (Swann, 1983). Across the life span, however, there are transitions that can have significant effects on self-definition (Hormuth, 1990; Ruble, 1994).

The study of ethnicity in migrant settler communities has always fascinated scholars all over the world (Choo 2006; Plüss 2005; Kibria 2008; Roy 2008). Recent studies have shown that among the migrant settler community, the sense of belonging to original ethnic cultural heritage is possible, natural, permitted and desirable for the person who is born into that ethnic group. One's origin is thus a performative which both enables and naturalizes an individual's ethnicity. Fruzzetti et al in the same spirit have showed the cultural construction of the person in Bengal and Tamil Nadu (Fruzzetti, Östör, and Barnett 1976). Closer to home, some studied issues of migrant settler communities in Bengal, and their survival strategies to cope with alien culture, and find their position in the micro economy (Shah 2006; Bose 2013; de Haan 2003).

However, the principal weaknesses of the temporal perspective of most these studies are cultural reductionism and historical determinism; whereas the spatial perspective suffers from analytical particularism and inflexible collectivism. To circumvent these epistemological problems it is necessary to articulate an alternative general understanding that conceptualizes ethnicity as a universal, interactive social situation. Ethnicity is frequently posited as an important factor in political contexts. Despite the attention that ethnicity receives, its effects depend on an important assumption that ethnicity is identifiable within and across groups. The strength of an individual's ethnic identity influences his ability to identify others correctly. Individuals with a stronger identity, however, are often better at correctly identifying the ethnicity of others relative to the average individual (Harris and Findley 2014). Improving upon this idea, studies on migrant settler communities and their internal processes to maintain 'ethnic boundary' have been a few. The present work would like to place itself in this sphere with the following issues in mind.

The Issues

In this present work, the author tries to understand the "plasticity of ethnicity" (borrowing the term of Jenkins, 1997) and how it is created, modified, and perpetuated among the members of a group that share a common culture, language, etc. even while setting in a distant place away from their original homeland and having people of other ethnic group(s) as neighbours. An effort has been made to find out: i) the self-ascription of identity, i.e., the Tamils' own impression of themselves; ii) how they see themselves as Tamils; iii) what according to them are essential and / or most important about being Tamil; and iv) what they think their peculiarities are.

Methods

The data for the present study are collected by conducting extensive fieldwork in a predominantly Tamil Brahmin settlement in the heart of Howrah city, West Bengal, India in two phases. In the first phase, the household census, genealogy of the lineal descendants, life histories etc. have been collected. In the second phase, religious festivals like "Mahamayi Avishekam", "Sri Rama Navami" have been studied. The data have

¹ Waters (1999) is a notable exception. In *Black Identities*, Waters describes differences between second-generation West Indians' ethnic identities depending on whether they live in largely African American neighbourhoods - leading to African American identity - or mixed areas - leading to West Indian ethnic identity.

been collected by being present in some of these festivals and observing in possible minute detail. Later, the recorded points have been rechecked by interviewing of concerned individuals and groups.

From February 2007 until October 2007 I conducted thirty-one in-depth interviews with them, ranging in length from one hour to 90 minutes. I met approximately half of my respondents through contacts with community leaders and a subsequent snowball sample. Nineteen respondents are second-generation, four are 1.5 generation (immigrants who came here before age twelve), and two are more recently arrived immigrants. The rests are even older settlers. Respondents report a diversity of jobs held either by them or their parents, who include mechanics, nurse aides, and doctors, managerial and clerical staffs at various Govt. and Private firms, and entrepreneurs. Finally, I have visited community organizations like the local “South Indian Club”, including a campaign office, religious institutions, and youth groups. Interviews focused on constructions of their identities, through questions on their personal and professional lives, tastes (music, movies, and clothing), festivals, social networks, and ethnic identities.

During the course of fieldwork, I realize that a researcher embarked on such a project is challenged in various ways. In a nutshell, the ubiquitous becomes elusive, and the anthropologist, if he happens to be from other ethnic group, is suspected of secretly laughing at and mocking people, practices and objects. As difficult as it is to explain and carry out the anthropological project under normal circumstances, it became even more so under those in which I found myself. The constraining relational and material conditions set by my fields played an essential role in contextualizing my agency as an anthropologist (Kalir 2006).

Reflections

The speakers often introduced their thoughts by explaining Aiyar-Iyengar attitudes to me, an outsider to their society, or by explaining something of the turmoil they have been experiencing or something of particular issues they are facing. My narrators are aware that they are subjects of my study and that they are explaining themselves and their society to me.

One of my informants, Mr. Venkatesh*, was particularly seemed to be interested in teaching me the Tamil way of life and traditions. The fact that I’m a Bengalee and quite unacquainted with Tamil life style seemed to have made him determined to ‘help’ me in my fieldwork. He had rather definite views on who were the “right” Tamils there to interview. The right ones were usually those he considered more traditional and thus more Tamil-like, just like back in Tamilnadu. Hence I ended up with roughly speaking three groups of interviewees. The first group, the people I more or less bumped into during the first phase of my fieldwork, represented a rough cross-section of the Tamil settlement there. The second group, with whom I got acquainted whilst observing the religious festivals performed in the South Indian club, represented the generation of young adults who, I presumed, might have been most exposed to change and outside influence. The third group, the ones chosen by Mr. Venkatesh*, consisted of the more traditional and the older settlers, and represented a common image of what he seemed to think were the more “real” Tamil.

The attitudes of Tamil settlers towards me as a researcher varied. None of them refused to be interviewed but there were some who thought a person representing an academic discipline, and also from a different ethnic background, cannot grasp the spiritual atmosphere of their community. Despite explicit explanation of my profession and purposes, some of them regarded me suspicious and interrogated me (always politely) in order to decipher my ‘real’ intentions. Moreover, it seemed a bit inappropriate for me as a man to interview young Tamil girls. Thus, there is a slight gender distortion in my fieldwork material owing to the fact that males (both boys and men) were simply easier to reach as, at least I presume, it was more proper for me to interview men than women. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees were friendly and talkative during my interviews. Most of them felt genuinely eager and interested in contributing to my study, and I’m truly grateful for their help. After the first phase of fieldwork, it seemed almost everybody, including those whom I never met, knew who I was and what I’m doing. The settlement seemed to be closely knitted in such communication.

At this point one must be reminded of the crisis of representation in a humanistic discipline like anthropology. Obviously, in addition to not being able to communicate with my informants using their mother tongue, my own ‘cultural baggage’ of a Bengalee background, the personal background, affected my interpretation in the field and in the writing process. A researcher is not a remote observer but a part of the field of research. Thus the anthropologist must be aware of the significance of his role and the subjectivity of the research process².

² One way to approach the problem of subjectivity has been to openly admit its existence and bring in the person of the researcher as a part of the study. Thus, since 1980s, self-reflection, writing out the experiences of fieldwork and

Simply put, the Tamil settlers here were sometimes hard for me to understand and their arguments even harder, and thus no ‘complete’ and “perfect” interpretation was possible by me – or dare I say would be by anyone, not even if the researcher is willing to list personal properties that might or might not have affected his research. As Steedman says, knowledge cannot be separated from the knower (Steedman 1991), and I am aware of the fact that here this article deals with *my* knowledge of the Tamil settlement in central Howrah.

In my field site, most of the Tamils belong to middle income category. Here, most of the households are of Tamil Brahmins related to each other in some way or other. Some claiming to belong to immediately lower echelon to Brahmins in caste hierarchy were noticed too but none of the so called lower castes (whom I mostly found in and around Salkia, Howrah) were noticed there. At first, my times were spent doing informal chatting to make myself and them comfortable with each other. These informal talks with them also helped me to get illuminated about certain aspects of their lives and made it somewhat easier for me to comprehend their accents of Tamil terms in later stages as I got used to it. The realization that in order to be prompt, interviewer should be conversant with the variables and must be informed about local conditions and culture to judge authenticity of replies and not to offend anyway the sentiments of the people being studied so as not to jeopardize the whole study dawned on me during the study. These informal talks, that I had at the beginning of my study helped me immensely. Some generalities from these data were made but that these generalities are context dependent.

Constructing Identity: sites of dialogical self-definition

The way in which cultural spectacles influence the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity is that they represent backdrops against which individuals and groups can participate in the so-called politics of identity. By now a certain scholarly consensus has emerged around the notion that individual and collective identities are articulated within or are dependent upon a kind of "dialogue" between conversational partners understood to occupy different positions within the overall social (or "discursive") system (Taylor 1994; cf. Gamson 1997; Mato 1998; Willems-Braun 1994; Frideres 1978).

It is often argued that boundaries are sustained because people remain confined to cultural spaces. Even when they immigrate, they retain their “cultural stuff” and do not surrender their individual cultural markers (Eriksen, 1993). Given these deliberations, one many argue that ethnic identities are acquired and assumed through processes of cultural articulation and reinforced through repetitive calls to threat to survival of these identities. Boundaries are always drawn in interactive situations. They are never drawn in isolation. Referring Eriksen (1993) in this regard, religion then is a strong factor in boundary maintenance and it is one of the most important factors that draw distinction between “Chenthamil” (Pure Tamil) and “Kodunthamil” (impure Tamil)³.

While inquiring about the Tamil’s own impression of them, some interesting points came to the fore. Respondents of each sex were asked not only about them but also on essential requirement of / for being a Tamil of opposite sex or how they would identify him / her as a Tamil. From these responses some generalities could be made. While for female of the sexes it ranged from wearing Saris (a traditional dress for womenfolk made up of one long piece of cloth) 18 hand long, knowing all traditional festivals and traditions, drawing some geometric designs (traditionally known as ‘kolam’) at the doorstep every morning with rice paste and vermilion, having sacred yellow thread (“Mangalasutram”) around the neck of every married Tamil woman to wearing flowers on the hair plait as part of decoration. For the man, it was sacred ash (‘bivuti’) smearing on forehead for Brahmins, wearing traditional dresses like “Dhoti” and “Angabastram” on festive and auspicious occasions etc. What seemed more interesting is that these responses revealed some stereotypical views not only about themselves but also of neighbouring other ethnic groups.

In one such interaction Mrs. Balasundari Murthi*⁴ preferred to emphasize the fact that it is the respect a Tamil wife gets from her husband that makes the Tamil so unique in this whole world. She gave her own example. She teaches in a nearby private English medium school and has to report to service in early morning, i.e., at about

contemplating its relation to the writing process have emerged as new tools of coping with subjectivity.

³ Linguistically, ‘Chenthamil’ means traditional orthodox Tamil language and ‘Kodunthamil’ means colloquial Tamil language. My fieldwork was based on two Tamil settlements in Howrah. The settlement described here consisted mostly of Tamil Brahmins, while the other settlement was of low caste groups engaged in menial works. Once in an interaction with a middle aged Tamil housewife, she referred the other settlement ‘Kodunthamil’.

⁴ All star (*) marked names changed on request to respect privacy.

5:30 AM. Her husband also wakes up at that time and does his own work himself and helps her doing household chores. According to her, he never complained to her about these and always cooperates with her. He also discusses each and every important matter with her, be it financial or private and asks her opinion. Mrs. Murthi also told that

“It doesn’t make him henpecked but rather an ideal husband who equally treats his wife. Whereas Bengalis treat their wives like second class citizens”.

She even imitated how average Bengalee usually behave when it comes to the decision making by ordering the wife in the gruff voice:

“What are you doing here now? Can’t you see we (the men-folk) are talking on a serious issue? Go and better make tea for us and leave us alone....”

She even cautioned me that like average Bengalee I should not bring a wife for doing household chores only and rather think of her as my better half (quite literally), whose pain might affect me too.

Some Other stereotypical notions of themselves also surfaced out in these interactions like every Tamil households being very particular on cleanliness, Tamils being punctual and disciplined, they retain the best of traditions and embrace the best of modernity. Some like Mr. S. Krishnan*, Mr. G. Raju*, and others even pointed out the fact that other communities, including Bengalee; recognize this fact about them in general. Mr. G. Raju provided an amusing anecdote to drive home this point. Back in the 1970s in his youth, once he was in dire need of cash for treatment of his ailing mother. He was still new in this area, which was then mostly populated by Bengalee. At that time, his Bengalee neighbour loaned that amount to him without taking anything against guarantee or against mortgage and said to him that he would rather do such thing for a South Indian (in general) than members of his own community as South Indians tend to be honest. Today, he is always ready to return the favour. Once in an interaction he mentioned names of Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray among his favourite authors, Netaji Subhas Bose as the greatest leader the country has ever produced. According to Mr. Raju, this mutual respect the two communities have for each other makes it possible to coexist in the same place peacefully for over half a century without a hitch.

All such stereotypical self-ascriptions of identity were noted as they were told. However, there is more to identity construction than such ascriptions which are so ingrained to the member’s psyche and their sense of belonging to the group that these are only expressed through some overt manifestations of activities, which in the most cases, are part of their lifestyle.

Articulating Beliefs and Negotiating Salience

Herberg’s “Protestant Catholic Jew” (1955) placed identity and identification as key to locating oneself in a social context - in this case religion as the marker⁵. However, here the question is not how elaborately such festivals are performed but on how and why they are maintained in certain manners even when an immigrant group is settled on a distant, away from their homeland and how it helps in their group identity. *The belief is that the moral standard and values of Caste-groups are distinctive – that these standards and values are special privileges that have to be dramatized on religious or ceremonial occasions to reaffirm their Caste-identity.* This has been particularly noticed among the higher ranked Caste groups. Upon being questioned on why they maintain such festivals and what could be the consequence of not performing these occasions, several of my Brahmin informants unanimously agreed that they do it because they are Brahmin and this way they teach their children to maintain it as an inevitable part of them being Tamil Brahmins.

As introduced in the beginning one many argue that ethnic identities are acquired and assumed through processes of cultural articulation and reinforced through repetitive calls to threat to survival of these identities. Boundaries are always drawn in interactive situations. They are never drawn in isolation. Religion is a strong factor in boundary maintenance (Eriksen, 1993) and it is one of the most important factors that draw distinction

5 Another question that seemed important is a corollary to the first one, “Who are mine?”. The identification of like people is often associated with stereotypical notions about ‘Us and Them’. The stereotypical self-ascription of identity was noted as they were told. However, there is more to identity construction than such ascriptions which are so ingrained to the member’s psyche and their sense of belonging to the group that these are only expressed through some overt manifestations of activities, which in the most cases, are part of their lifestyle.

between “Chenthamil” (Pure Tamil) and “Kodunthamil” (impure Tamil). Same case studies have been provided to clear the point in consideration a little more.

Case 1

Dr. K. S.* (41 years, Aiyar Brahmin) is a consultant anesthesiologist of a famous group of Hospitals at Rash Behari Avenue and Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata. After doing his MD, he completed his FRCA degree from London. Dr. K. S.* is a second generation Tamil settler who was born and brought up here. He provided an amusing anecdote on how he was regarded as Bengali while studying in Medical College by other Bengali friends. According to him, it was only at the end of year when he had to fill up some forms that his friends saw him filling up a provided space as Tamil Brahmin and were astonished that he never looked like a Tamil or spoke like that.

Dr. K. S.* is a regular participant at Bhajana singing rituals and in many cases that I have seen, he leads the chorus singing. He (along with Mr. S.S. Raman*, his brother in law) is the official Bhajana-in-charge. Dr. K. S.* always makes it a point to be present at any festival the South Indian Club holds. In numerous occasions he had to take part in Bhajana singing directly on his way back from hospital and he could be easily distinguished with his western attire and mobile phone hanging from neck amidst other singers who are mostly ‘Bivuti’ smeared on upper torso and wearing ‘Dhoti’. According to him it is the ‘Bhakti’ (reverence) that counts and not attires. He could not maintain the usual routine of being a Tamil Brahmin like doing ‘Achamanam’ (chanting sacred mantra or hymns before eating) as he eats in restaurants or canteens etc. and has to do many unpleasant things because of his profession. But taking part in Bhajan is easier for him and it brings him a kind of mental peace as he thinks it somehow negates the bad elements in his life. It also makes him more acceptable and honoured to his fellow Tamil. Later he also confided as most Bhajan singing are done after sunset, he could always bring out time after his professional duty gets over. Earlier the club celebrated 5 to 6 festivals but now it celebrates about 53 festivals a year. According to Dr. K. S.*, the members hardly meet in club except Sunday evenings. But when the club celebrates something, it is mandatory for members to be present at it and to donate liberally for the occasion. This mandatory presence makes it possible for the Tamil here to meet and spend quality time with each other and this strengthens internal cohesion and bonding.

Case 2

Mrs. Alamelu Ganeshan*, wife of Mr. K. Ganeshan*, has been residing in the area since her marriage. Before that, she was in Jamshedpur with her parents. A typical day for her starts with chanting the names of God, first thing in the morning after she wakes up at about 4:30 am. Then she (and so does each one of her family members) looks at the palm of their hands and chants:

*“Kar agre basate Laxmi,
Kara mule Saraswati,
Kara madhay Sri Govindan
Probbate Kara darshanam”.*

[The Goddess of wealth resides at tip of fingers,
The Goddess of learning at the end of fingers,
at the middle resides God Sri Govindan
see every morning this resident of Gods and Goddesses].

She learnt it from her parents and she says that most of the Tamils do this. On being asked the rationale or significance behind the tradition, she said at first that remembering Gods first thing in morning makes her day lucky. Later she told me every one’s destiny lies in his/her palm/hand. One earns bread by labour and one learns through writing – both of which require hand.

“Gods are always with you in your hand, it is how you choose to appease them that matters.”

Doing one’s own things on his own and working hard ensures harmonious living. God is never going to help one if he lies idle. So by chanting their names in morning, you are not only requesting them to help you but you are also reminding yourself that the proper way of propitiating them is working honestly and hard.

She told me after this that she worships the idol of Muruga and then goes through her daily routine. Apart from celebrating festivals in due time, she does not do anything other than worshipping Goddess Laxmi on Friday.

However, in another such conversation, she told me that whenever she faces any difficulty in her life, she closes her eyes and chants:

*“Asaddhya sadhaka swami
thava kim vadaba
Ram doota kripa sindho
Math karyam sadhaya prabho”*

[O the one making even impossible a possibility,
Give your blessings to me.
O the messenger of God Rama,
Make my work possible.]

She chants it addressing Lord Hanuman and then goes about her work and she says that it works to her advantage every time. She gave me an example. She is working in a nearby *Rakhi*⁶ factory for the past 7 years. About 2 years ago, she wanted a raise and decided to approach the authority. Before her a colleague also went there for raise but she was turned down and humiliated. So Mrs. Ganeshan was apprehensive at first. But she decided to go anyway. She said that before going she chanted this mantra and felt confident about the whole issue. By God's grace, though at first she was turned down, her superiors reconsidered the decision and she was given a raise. According to her, the Tamil are religious by nature and it is the faith in God that makes them able to sustain themselves in any situations.

Case 3.

One of the oldest settler of the area, Mr. G. R. Viswanathan* (72 years, Aiyar Brahmin), also one of the three permanent trustees of “South Indian Association”, told me about the history of the Tamil settlement here.

As he claimed, it was here in this area that the South Indians first settled. At that time the whole area or almost all of it was owned by two brothers – Ashu Bose and Tarapada Bose. They were the Zamindars (landlords) here. But after independence when rules on land ceiling came into place, they decided to sell their landed properties. The South Indians, who till that time resided here as tenants, moved towards Bow Bazar area as they could not manage to buy the property here. Thereafter they moved towards Bhawanipur then to Lake Market – South Calcutta area and now they have dispersed to many other areas too.

According to him, the number of Tamil families in this settlement has been recorded in the club log book from the 1960's. He provided an account of the number of Tamil families in the area in every decade from 1970's. While in 1970, the total no. of Tamil families in the area was 17, it grew up to 26 in 1980. The number rose to 43 in 1990 and in 2007, it rests at 52 families of Tamil in the area. The club maintains close relations with other such associations such as ‘Vedanta House’ of South Calcutta and helps other Tamils new to the city in finding easy accommodation. Earlier the club celebrated about 5 to 6 festivals but now it celebrates about 53 festivals a year. He plays the pivoting role of coordinator in such endeavours. According to him, such festivals provide the members an opportunity to interact with one another under the same umbrella. He is also one of the key Bhajana (devotional songs praising God) singers in all such occasions. Once I happened to ask him his opinions on religious festivals observed here and in Tamilnadu. According to him, the club South Indian Association here has much bigger role to play in fulfilling religious commandments. He feels that as the senior most among the patriarchs, his duty and obligations towards abiding by the traditions is more. In all these conversations the impression that was presented seemed to me to be of a senior figure who considers it his duty to shepherd the younger lot to the right path in a place which is far away from their homeland. While in Tamilnadu, it might not have been his headache as that duty would have been performed by the community itself, here in alien surrounding where younger generation is more susceptible and vulnerable to the risk of forgetting their own roots, somebody has to take it upon himself to set the right example.

That religion acts as a marker of ethnic identity has been discussed by Brass (1991), Barth (1969), and others. In this present study, the following issues emerged as significant–

- (a) While the maintenance of religious orthodoxy outwardly may be justified in association with penance or to gain confidence, inwardly it points to a sense of supremacy associated with notions of purity and pollution.
- (b) That such celebrations give a sense of belonging to the group and thereby extends cohesion and mutual

⁶ Rakhi is a predominantly North Indian festival in which sisters tie decorated thread on the wrist of their brothers.

understanding among the members.

(c) Such celebration means repeated interaction among group members and spending time with each other and gossiping. It thereby creates a vast network not only among kin group but among non kin members also (as is the case with helping Tamils new to the city in finding accommodation) that leads to solving of many other problems.

To the question “What is your group identity” – a Tamil may answer by identifying himself as Tamil, his Caste-name or Caste-title, his language, occupation, religious or political affiliations etc. Depending on the context and who the questioner is, the answer would vary. An individual has a coherent system of self and group identity. But what this system does is to enable the individual to employ and deploy multiple identities in his lifetime and in different experiential contexts. In other words, there is no set pattern of identities that remain static by which an individual identifies himself. The individual knows what appropriate identity is to dramatize, and knows how to respond to the dramatization of the appropriate identity by others. This knowing comes from internalization of symbols of respective cultural boundaries, and their significance comes from their use. The use also verifies the validity of symbols.

Conclusion

In short, religious spectacles may facilitate the presentation of dramatic performances of identity directed not only by, but also at themselves in order to tell a certain kind of story about what it might mean for individuals and groups to combine within themselves various identities (Tamil, Indian, first generation, second generation, rural, urban, local, global, etc.). Since more and more generations of children born in Howrah lack an unmediated personal memory or experience of another (i.e., neither Bengali nor Hindi) language, religion, or entirely Tamil place, regular performances of identity are crucial means of perpetuating or recreating a particular identity in immigrant Tamil community. By encouraging ethnic communities to re-enact and re-experience concentrated versions of a particular ethnic identity in a public (and even ritualistic) manner, religious festivals such as mentioned above exemplify the form of “Tamilism” that encourages conversational partners to speak from specific discursive locations. Scholars may argue that the identities celebrated in such festivals are reified, whereas identity is also (or, according to some, only) dynamic, constructed, and “processual” (Baumann 1999). However, we should not overlook the reasons (different in each case) that communities choose to depict themselves in one way and not another⁷. In short, if identity emerges dialogically, cultural spectacles may be one way to provide minority groups with opportunities to engage the assumptions held by their discursive partners, and in so doing, to influence their own and their partners’ identities. While certain aspects did seem to experience or evidence processes of secularization, the pervasive disenchantment that was forecast by secularization theorists has not come to pass.

New environments may challenge the meaning or value of an identity. Breakwell (1986) describes a variety of situations, including the loss of employment, and cultural conflicts, that pose threats to identity. If severe enough, threats can call into question the very existence of an identity. Immigration in itself might not act as an active agent or threat but subsequent adaptation to new milieu which influences and feeds man’s inherent urge get accepted in surrounding cultural milieu in turn igniting a retaliating stride towards orthodoxy.

Culture, as defined, is not a coherent organized set of symbols but a repertoire of symbols that is accumulated over time in man’s interaction with environment. The human beings, who inherit access to a particular repertoire, are constantly engaged in “active, self-conscious construction of cultural systems and they draw selectively on their culture’s repertoire of symbols, never using all the symbols available (Pandian 1987).

When one tries to blend the above two with ideas of ethnicity, one can say that all human beings are engaged in an ‘active, self-conscious’ attempt to construct definitions of who they are as a people. In their cultural reservoir are symbols of people hood. These available symbols construct ‘ethnicity’ – the symbols of ‘cultural boundary’ (Barth 1969).

In this present work, the whole concept of ethnicity appears as a conglomeration of religious symbols which embody the cognitive and emotive cultural boundaries of a group. The idea of “Chenthamil” (pure Tamil)

⁷ Halter describes the way Irish tourists are surprised by the elaborate nature of post-1970s St. Patrick’s Day celebrations (and Irish pride and nationalism) in the United States. In response, Irish people have expanded on their own St. Patrick’s Day festivities to accommodate the expectations of American tourists to Ireland. Halter argues that such American festivals reflect the weakening of social and geographic ties and the transformation of communal memories of the homeland (2000: 160-168)

depends on ritual or religious symbols that evoke certain imageries while their celebration and maintenance of orthodoxy has hints of political strategy to convey a sense of supremacy and distinctiveness of an immigrant group.

Barth (1969) in his construction of “ethnic boundaries” prefers to use the term poly-ethnic instead of multi-ethnic. India with its diverse populations, regional differences, linguistic and multi religious character if can be considered as a poly-ethnic society, the same cannot be claimed about a person’s group identity because of complex play of stereotyped clusters as characteristic of one single identity. On being asked –“what is your group identity?” a Tamil may answer by identifying his caste title or caste name, his language, occupation, religious or political affiliation. Depending on the context and who the questioner is, the answer would vary.

It is ironic that even as we try to deny, mostly as patriotic gesture that we are “Indians first and foremost and Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Tamil or Bengali etc. later” (the most often repeated answer to my queries), we do sustain and nurture with enormous amount of jealousy our primary identities and subsequently boundaries associated with these identities. In an effort to remind ourselves about our sub-conscious or conscious boundaries, we often play ritualistic tribute to cultural traits that tell us – “we are different”. It can be dress, language etc. Each of these is a symbolic and essential attribute to ascertain of our status in society that is essentially poly-ethnic.

Mehta (1989) made similar assertion whereby a case was made for examining ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ identities while discussing multiple identities experienced by people belonging to diverse communities in India⁸. As for example, when the Bengali neighbours were asked on their Tamil neighbours, it was clear that for the outsiders, a few tokens of identity usually sufficient that are mainly stereotypical versions. But it is more rigorously judged within a group and this sentiment helps in ethnic network formations as discussed. Thus while individual histories might be forgotten, the ‘Strong’ and ‘Weak’ ties of network are created on the basis of immigrant group’s history and shared common heritage that helps to maintain their ‘core’ identity even after its “assimilation” to other groups in some other criteria.

Suggestions for further research

Further research might be necessary in this field to explore the dynamics of perception between boys and girls of the same ethnic settlers. Within the Tamil settlement I studied, young men, and women showed a remarkable facility with the myriad cultural tool kits available to them. Listening to music from South India, the contemporary western, and the Bengali, as well as many hybrid styles is just one example of how they maintain multiple aspects and influences on their identities. In other aspects of their identities, however, these young men and women exhibit quite distinct identities. Girls are more interested in many things mainstream Indian, especially Hindi movies. Boys, on the other hand, distance themselves from a mainstream ‘North Indian’ identity. Hence although both young Tamil men and women of this settlement craft multivalent identities, gender plays an important role in some of the choices that they make about ethnic boundaries. The gender differences arise from different degrees of peer-based symbolic capital associated with Tamil male identity and Tamil female identity in urban mainstream Indian youth culture today.

References

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. 1990. *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances*. Springer-Verlag, New York.
- Alba, R. 1990. *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. Yale University, New Haven.
- Alba, R. 2014. ‘The twilight of ethnicity: what relevance for today?’ *Ethnic and Racial Studies (Special Issue: Ethnic and Racial Studies Review)*, 37: 5, 781-85.
- Bader, V. 2001. ‘Culture and identity: Contesting constructivism’. *Ethnicities*, 1: 2, 252–85.
- Barth, F. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Allen and Unwin, London.
- Baszanger, I. and Dodier, N. 1997. ‘Ethnography: Relating the whole’, in David Silverman (ed) *Qualitative*

⁸ She argued: “Various religious, cultural, and linguistic diversities occupying the Indian sub-continent are not crowds (...). They have their respective histories and many other intra-community commonalities – the sense of belonging which keeps the members of these communities together irrespective of their geographical placements is termed as ‘core identity’.”

- Research: Theory Method and Practice*. The Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- Baumann, G. 1999. *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. Routledge, New York.
- Bogdan, R. and Tylor, S. J. 1975. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences*. Willy, New York.
- Bologh, Roslyn Wallace. 1979. *Dialectical Phenomenology: Marx's Method*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, Boston.
- Bose, A. 2013. 'Kolkata's Early Chinese Community And Their Economic Contributions'. *South Asia Research*, 33:2, 163-176.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Brass, P. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- Breakwell, G. 1986. *Coping with threatened identities*. Methuen, London.
- Brewer, M. B. 1991. 'The social self: On being the same and different at the same time'. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17, 475-82.
- Choo, H. Y. 2006. 'Gendered Modernity and Ethnicized Citizenship: North Korean Settlers in Contemporary South Korea'. *Gender & Society*, 20:5, 576-604. http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/gender/Publications/genderedmodernity_choo.pdf
- de Haan, A. 2003. 'Calcutta's labour migrants: Encounters with modernity'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 37:1-2, 189-215.
- Deaux, K. 1993. 'Reconstructing social identity'. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 4-12.
- Deaux, K., & Major, B. 1987. 'Putting gender into context: An interactive model of gender-related behavior'. *Psychological Review*, 94, 369- 89.
- Durkheim, E. and Mauss, M. 1963. *Primitive Classification*, Cohen and West, London.
- Eriksen, T. H. 1993. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pluto Press, London.
- Frale, D. E. S., Wortman, C., and Joseph, J. 1997. 'Predicting self-esteem, well-being, and distress in a cohort of gay men: The importance of cultural stigma, personal visibility, community networks, and positive identity'. *Journal of Personality*, 65, 599-624.
- Frideres, J. S. 1978. 'Indian Identity and Social Conflict'. In L. Driedger, (ed.) *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity*. McLelland and Stewart, Toronto.
- Fruzzetti, L., Östör, Á. and Barnett, S. 1976. 'The cultural construction of the person in Bengal and Tamil Nadu'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 10:1, 157-182.
- Gamson, J. 1997. 'Messages of Exclusion: Gender, Movements, and Symbolic Boundaries.' *Gender and Society*, 11:2, 178-199.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Hutchinson & Co, London.
- Gordon, M. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. Oxford University, New York.
- Halter, M. 2000. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. Schocken Books, New York.
- Harris, A. and Findley, M. 2014. 'Is Ethnicity Identifiable? Lessons from an Experiment in South Africa'. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58:1, 4-33.
- Hogg, M. A. & Abrams, D. 1988. *Social identifications*. Routledge, London.
- Holstein, J.A. and Gubrium, J.F. 1997. 'Active Interviewing', in David Silverman (ed) *Qualitative Research: Theory Method and Practice*, The Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- Hormuth, S. E. 1990. *The ecology of the self: Relocation and self-concept change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
- Jacobson, M. F. 1998. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Jenkins, R. 1977. *Rethinking Ethnicity : Arguments and Explanations*. Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- Kalir, B. 2006. 'The field of work and the work of the field: Conceptualising an anthropological research engagement'. *Social Anthropology*, 14:2, 235-46.
- Kibria, N. 2008. 'Muslim encounters in the global economy: Identity developments of labor migrants from Bangladesh to the Middle East'. *Ethnicities*, 8: 4, 518-535.
- Mato, D. 1998. 'The Transnational Making of Representations of Gender, Ethnicity and Culture: Indigenous Peoples' Organizations at the Smithsonian Institution's Festival.' *Cultural Studies*, 12:2, 193-209.
- Mehta, S. 1989. 'Dilemma of Identity Assertion in a Pluralistic Society: A case study of Indian Polity.' *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 42:3, 265-76.

- Miller, G. and Fox, K. J. 1997. 'Building the Bridges: The Possibility of Analytic Dialogue between Ethnography, Conversation Analysis, Foucault', in David Silverman (ed) *Qualitative Research: Theory Method and Practice*, The Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- Oakes, P. J. 1987. 'The salience of social categories'. J. C. Turner (ed.) *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford, England.
- Ogbu, J. 1991. 'Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities in Comparative Perspective', John Ogbu and Margaret Gibson (eds), *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities*, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Pandian, J. 1987. *Caste, Nationalism and Ethnicity : An Interpretation*. Popular Prakashan, Bombay.
- Phinney, J. S. 1991. 'Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem: A Review and Integration', *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 13:2, 193-208.
- Plüss, C. 2005. 'Constructing Globalized Ethnicity: Migrants from India in Hong Kong'. *International Sociology*, 20:2, 201-224.
- Portes, A. and Min, Z. 1993. 'The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants'. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 530, 74-96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1047678>
- Portes, A. and Ruben, R. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Roy, A. 2008. 'Between encompassment and closure: The 'migrant' and the citizen in India'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42: 2, 219-248.
- Ruble, D. 1994. 'A phase model of transitions: Cognitive and motivational consequences'. M. Zanna (ed.) *Advances in social psychology*. Academic Press, San Diego, CA.
- Seol, B. 2008. 'A Critical Review of Approaches to Ethnicity'. *International Area Studies Review*, 11: 2, 333-64.
- Shah, A. 2006. 'The labour of love: Seasonal migration from Jharkhand to the brick kilns of other states in India'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 40:1, 91-118. http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/710/1/ANTH_SHAH_2006a.pdf
- Smaje, C. 1996. 'The Ethnic Patterning of Health: New Directions for Theory and Research'. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 18: 2, 139-71
- Steedman, P. H. 1991. 'On the Relation between Seeing, Interpreting and Knowing.' Steier, Frederick (ed.) *Research and Reflexivity*. Sage Publication, London.
- Swann, W. B. Jr. 1983. 'Self-Verification: Bringing Social Reality into Harmony with the Self.' Suls J. & Greenwald A. G. (Eds.), *Social psychological perspectives on the self*. Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ. <http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Swann/docu/swBSRHS83.pdf>
- Tajfel, H. 1981. *Human groups and social categories*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
- Taylor, C., et Al. 1994. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Amy Gutmann (ed.) Princeton: Princeton University Press. http://veraznanjemir.bos.rs/materijal/multiculturalism._examining_the_politics_of_recognition_-_charles_taylor.pdf
- Turner, J. C. 1987. *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, England.
- Valkonen, S. 2014. 'The embodied boundaries of ethnicity'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17:2, 209-24.
- Warikoo, N. 2005. 'Gender and ethnic identity among second-generation Indo-Caribbeans'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28:5, 803-31.
- Waters, M. C. 1990. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA
- Waters, M. C. 1999. *Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American realities*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Willems-Braun, B. 1994. 'Situating Cultural Politics: Fringe Festivals and the Production of Spaces of Intersubjectivity.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12: 1, 75- 104.