

WHEN DRAGONS DANCE

CELEBRATIONS begin at midnight for the 12,000 Chinese in Calcutta, to bring in the New Year with a month of feasting and merry-making. This year, New Year's day was January 28.

In Tangra, where the Hakka Chinese, the most numerous and prosperous community, live and work in the tanneries, festivities start with young men and boys gathering in the narrow lanes, each behind the dragon of his club, exquisite papier mache heads with fine new cloth trains. Then, at the auspicious moment, the lion dancers (as the dragon-bearing youths are called) run down the streets, twirling and leaping, followed by their pennant-carrying club members, all dressed alike in white T shirts, blue jeans, red waistbands and headbands, with the letters of their club on their backs.

So on into the early morning—each club makes the rounds of about a hundred altars, set up in homes, in old and modern tanneries—while the stench from the leather fills the air.

Guards fan aside the firecrack-

The Chinese in Calcutta celebrate their New Year for a month. JENNIFER PRABHU describes the quaint festivities which, this year, end on February 28.

ers that the host at each altar spreads in mock battle. The dragons then kow tow to the altar, the hosts returning the greetings. Each group presents its good-luck card printed in red (the colour of happiness) and receives a packet of money in a red envelope in return.

But the smoke from crackers softens the grim factory walls and forms a romantic haze through which illuminations twinkle. Exquisite old lamps (brought long ago from China) hang from rooftops.

Then the scene shifts to Chinatown, in the heart of the business area. The beautiful old Chinatown dragon, his age long forgotten, dances through the lanes with two boys holding up his train. He climbs ladders and boys' shoulders to the music of drums and cymbals, opening his clapper jaws to 'eat' lettuce dangled teasingly from upper storeys. As

he grabs each bunch of lettuce, little envelopes of money tied to the string flutter down—the contributions of householders on each floor—usually containing Rs. 2. to Rs. 5 each. A member of the team hands out the good luck cards.

Chinatown in its heyday could never have been salubrious. Even now, it is a bustee of grimy multi-storey buildings that rise off narrow lanes. The sun never reaches the streets, so that they are always wet and slushy.

Traders from Shanghai, carpenters from Canton, dentists from Fau Peh, the ancestors of Chinatown's Chinese population, long pre-date the arrival of Hakka Chinese, the shoemaker community in Tangra, who are larger-built, more prosperous and ethnically purer than the Chinatowners whose ancestors came to India more than a hundred years ago.

As movement to and from a

parent country slows down and then ceases, an ethnic group slowly assumes the characteristics of a sub-culture: somewhere between that obtaining in the parent country when contact was lost, and the culture of the country of domicile. So Calcutta's Chinatowners are today nearly entirely Christian, and inter-marry with Christians, mainly from other sub-cultures — Goans, Anglo-Indians and Armenians. So also is inter-marriage with Sikhs, Bengalis, Muslims and Gorkhas common. Calcutta Chinese youths speak a patois of their own, composed of Chinese and English words in a base of Hindi. They also speak Gorkhali and Bengali.

While many children attend Anglo-Indian schools and convents, some four hundred are educated in Chinese language schools, the largest and handomest being the fifty-year-old Roman Catholic Fei Mei Chinese School in Tangra. Text-books come from Taiwan.

Employment for girls is no problem—as hairdressers, receptionists, teachers, secretaries. But employment for boys, except in the tanneries, is difficult. The government does not grant automatic Indian citizenship to those born before 1950—but few Chinese seek government jobs, anyway. Their dream is always to open a little business of their own. By hard saving, and money lent by relatives in Chinatowns broad, they strive towards this end.

But the great blow-out is this month (February) of New Year—a month of gambling, drinking and merry-making, when the community throws thrift and hard work to the winds! Losers at cards or mah jong often rush out to pawn gold they've spent years accumulating. Fights and disturbances are common. Girls and women most often buy their evening meal en route from tram-cars—where fried noodles and meats are always available—before roaring off to cinemas—lovers on the pillion of boy friends' motor-bikes.

Time may be running out for the Calcutta Chinese as a separate community, but, as individuals, these merry, hard-working people enrich this and every city of their adoption.



NEW YEAR revellers in Calcutta's Chinatown.