



## **Becoming Citizens: Construction Workers in Beijing and Delhi**

**Speaker:** Irene Pang, Doctoral Candidate, Brown University

**Chair:** Dr. Ashwini Deshpande, Honorary Fellow, ICS

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The presentation by Ms. Irene Pang revolved around the correlation between capitalism and democratic development; and the impact of capitalism on citizenship rights among construction workers (internal migrants) in Beijing and Delhi. As part of her fieldwork, extensive interactions were carried out with government officials, petty sub-contractors, the workers who migrated from villages to cities, and engineers at the sites of construction in both Beijing and Delhi. The hypothesis with regard to the impact of capitalism on democratic development was substantiated by theories and assumptions of Rueschemeyer and Stephens & Stephens (1992).

The speaker began by arguing that citizenship is constructed through day-to-day exercise; it is not ready made. Her study, therefore, looked at the daily lives and disputes of the construction workers. She revealed that of the seven sites in Beijing and five in Delhi that she covered, only one dispute case was found in Delhi as compared to five in Beijing. The entire study covered over 150 workers in each city. She spent 9 months each, first in Beijing and later in Delhi to conduct her field work.

The speaker informed that she would be making only a few preliminary observations given the fact that the work was ongoing. A comprehensive analysis of the studies conducted in Delhi and Beijing is not yet ready. Her main findings are: there is a much lower level of rights consciousness among construction workers in Delhi in terms of articulation of rights and legal knowledge in comparison to Beijing.

The speaker categorized her study of construction workers into four major themes viz. the capacity to aspire; informality and stateness; the professionalization of civil society; and social

embeddedness. Referring to Arjun Appadurai (2004), the speaker argued that aspirations are not individualistic but emerge as a result of inter-relations and social life. The speaker measured the access to information using four parameters: literary/language; public channels of information; technology; and state capacity/institutions. In Delhi, workers were found unable to articulate the language of rights. They had very poor knowledge of laws, minimum wages, etc. They were not aware of what they were being denied, which results in the production of poverty. Compared to construction workers in Delhi, Beijing workers were more aware about their rights. One of the reasons for this difference is the language or level of education. In Delhi, workers generally speak Hindi but are not able to write, whereas in Beijing, most of the construction workers not only speak mandarin but also know how to write. Second, construction workers in Beijing make full use of technology such as use of smart phone to access any information about their rights. Moreover, many institutions of state capacity are absent in India. The speaker further noted that though the problem of implementation of law is witnessed in both Delhi and Beijing, yet there is a larger gap in India between the formal laws and their actual implementation on the ground.

Comparing the legal structure of rights of workers, the speaker discussed the workers' laws in both India and China. In China, there are two laws: Labour Law (1994), Labour Contract Law (2008). Also, legal documents are just few pages, easy to read as well as easy to be accessed by the construction workers. Whereas in India, there are many laws such as Building and Other Construction Workers Act (1996), Contract Labour Act (1970), Delhi Shops and Establishments Act (1954), Industrial Dispute Act (1947), Payment of Wages Act (1936), and Minimum Wages Act. The speaker also cited some case studies to substantiate her arguments. Apart from implementation, the speaker also noticed other problems with laws in India, for instance, there were too many types of laws under which a construction work could make an appeal. However, this made an appeal process very cumbersome as an appellant is not sure which law applies to him/her.

The speaker raised a pertinent question regarding the role and professionalism of civil society in the life of construction workers and safeguarding of their rights. She argued that India enjoys a wide network of civil society organizations but still it does not guarantee the well-being of construction workers. She argued that this was owing to the capitalist logic informing the works of many of the CSOs.

The significance of social embeddedness lies in access to jobs, survival in city, social ties as guarantees, and so on. The nature of these societies has impact for labour dispute and works as a threshold for claim making. For instance, in India, workers usually prefer to go to the petty contractors in case they face issues of non-payments and others. This she argued is owing to the strong sense of kinship ties among the workers and the contractors who brought them to the city for work. This was not visible in China, where the workers tended to take up their case with the State.

The speaker concluded that capitalist development affects the conceptualization, exercise and contestation of citizenship rights. It rather leads to the expansion of rights. The other actors such as capacity of citizens, historical context, institutions play a significant role in this process.

## **Discussion**

The Chair, Ashwini Deshpande raised some important questions and also gave her comments. She argued that the problem of accessing laws persists even for people from other sections, even rich and educated people. She mentioned about how constructions workers in informal sector are different from that of formal sector. She also asked to consider the pull and push factors influencing workers' dispensation towards their citizenship rights.

A number of questions pertained to the interlinkage between kinship and caste in this whole process of conceptualization and exercise of rights among construction workers in India. Responding to these questions, the speaker argued that caste does not play much role in the case of construction workers in India. Another question was on the possibility of the role of caste and kinship in transfer of knowledge through caste networks among construction workers in Delhi. The speaker affirmed that this was the case and that knowledge never navigated afresh. That any worker always comes via somebody, though it is not strictly caste based. Rather, kinship network played important role here. But this transfer is limited to low skilled jobs.

Addressing a question regarding the scale of resistance among Delhi construction workers, the speaker argued that the degree of resistance is lower among Delhi construction workers compared to workers in Beijing. Responding to another question about the difference in nature of labour market and construction sites in Delhi and Beijing, the speaker argued that workers conditions vary in both the places but not much. On the question of role of public interest groups, she was of the view that these days, trade union is just another different type of economic service. She also argued that the phenomenon of internal migration in China is quite new whereas it has been there in India for quite long now.

On the comment about pleading discourse being preferred over resistance among Indian workers, the speaker that it seemed to be the first choice among construction workers in both Delhi and China. When someone from the audience commented on the role of hukou as a barrier to services among construction workers, the speaker argued that this is not quite different from Delhi as the construction workers in Delhi also don't really have any social security number or unique identification (UIDs) which obstruct their access to services. Responding to a question about circular migration, she commented that circular migration is prevalent in both Delhi and Beijing.

Many other significant questions were raised such as the role of gender in construction sites and in access to services, the difference in extent and nature of informality in Beijing and Delhi, and the education scenario of construction worker's children, among others. The speaker argued that in Beijing, a greater number of male workers are engaged in construction sector and usually they

do not bring their families along to the city or the construction sites. This is partly owing to hukou constraints. However, in India, men tend to bring their families along during migration. This probably explains the presence of women and children at construction sites. In both Beijing and Delhi, it is equally hard to prove their identity as workers to avail law protection or other social facilities. In case of Beijing, construction workers' children are usually educated in villages or a nearby county.

Another interesting point is how in Beijing, workers use their notebooks and smartphones to record their work outputs (even though not tenable legally), but this is completely absent among workers in Delhi. Responding to a comment on role of land in lives of construction workers in Beijing and Delhi, the speaker discussed the significance of land as a vital source of social harmony as well as a guarantee of survival in absence of jobs in both the places.

*Report prepared by Renu Rana, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### **About the Speaker**

Irene Pang is a Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Sociology and a trainee under the Graduate Program in Development at Brown University. She holds an MA in Sociology from Brown University and a BA in Sociology with a Certificate in Cross-National Sociology and International Development from the Johns Hopkins University. Her dissertation project studies how capitalist development affects the conceptualization, expression, and contestation of citizenship through the experience of internal migrants in China and India, specifically that of construction workers in Beijing and Delhi. She is a recipient of the Bucerius PhD Scholarship from the ZEIT-Stiftung (Germany), the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant (US), and the Brown-India Initiative Graduate Fellowship.

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