

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Contours of the Youth Crisis
in China Today*

REPORT

Speakers :

Hemant Adlakha
Amb. Kishan Rana

30 August 2023

SUMMARY

- The seminar explored the various dimensions of China's contemporary youth crisis. Characterised by a surge in unemployment and a decline in white-collar job opportunities, this crisis has defied the Chinese government's claim that the Chinese people unanimously endorse both the party rule and the governance model under Xi Jinping.
- Dr. Adlakha highlighted that in recent years, China's educated youth are increasingly compelled to accept low-wage jobs or enter the informal sector. Earlier, the majority of the urban unemployed youth only had a high-school education, while today, over 70% possess higher education degrees.
- Amb. Rana traced the origins of the present despondency among the Chinese youth regarding employment back to the One-Child Policy, arguing that the crisis could be an unanticipated consequence of the same. Drawing a comparison between India and China, he noted that Indian youth are more proactive in seeking employment, even if it is low-paying.
- The speakers concluded by agreeing that the youth crisis in China is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires further exploration and research. This subject extends beyond economic aspects and touches upon social, cultural, and policy dimensions. They also highlighted the importance of conducting comparative research on India and China on similar lines.

REPORT

Speakers: Dr. Hemant Adlakha, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Vice Chairperson and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Amb. Kishan Rana, former Ambassador/ High Commissioner; Professor Emeritus, DiploFoundation, Malta & Geneva; and, Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Sabaree Mitra, Chairperson and Professor, Centre for Chinese & South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 30 August 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

On 30 August 2023, the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi organised a seminar titled, "Contours of the Youth Crisis in China Today", with Dr. Hemant Adlakha and Amb. Kishan Rana as the speakers. The seminar delved into the escalating crisis of unemployment, and the resultant despondency among the youth in China, while also drawing a comparative on the youth crises in India and China.

The seminar commenced with the Chair, Prof. Sabaree Mitra, highlighting the importance of the youth in constituting a prominent force in the transformation and associated transition of any society in the world. According to her, China in particular has witnessed this since the early 20th century, from time to time, starting with the May Fourth movement.

Dr. Adlakha, in his presentation, noted that the youth crisis has manifested from the unemployment crisis that has suddenly emerged in China. According to him, millions of new graduates in China, could not find jobs, in particular white-collar jobs, in the last two years. He believes, that such large-scale unemployment in China not only defies Xi Jinping's claims that the CPC's model of governance is more efficient than those prevalent in other countries, but it

also challenges the Chinese government's narrative that the Chinese people are in unanimous acceptance of Party rule, and Xi Jinping's policies.

Substantiating his arguments with a plethora of facts and figures, Dr. Adlakha further noted that in recent years millions of youths with tertiary educational qualifications have been grappling with unemployment, or have been coerced into accepting low-wage occupations, or have been marginalised into the informal sectors of the economy. Out of the 96 million youth residing in urban areas, nearly 33 million are without employment, 48 million remain engaged in education, and the remaining 16 million are described as 'professional children'. He also highlighted the attempts of the Chinese government to regulate the dissemination of any data related to labour and employment in the country.

Dr. Adlakha further noted that unlike a decade ago, when the majority of the urban unemployed youth, aged between 16 and 24, only had a high school education, now over 70% of them hold higher education degrees. Within this category, 42% of them have earned post-graduation or even higher degrees. Dr. Adlakha also cited the role of the pandemic in exacerbating this crisis among the youth. Invoking figures from a survey from July 2023, he noted that among the first and second graduate cohorts of 2022 and 2023, 85% stated that their lives have been less fulfilling, 75% of them said that their sense of security had been reduced, and 70% of them said that they feel less confident now.

Dr. Adlakha concluded by saying that slow economic growth is not the only cause of unemployment among the youth. Factors such as decreased consumer demand, issues in the real estate sector, and the lack of accessible healthcare have also contributed to the problem. According to him, these concerns have not been attended to in the last decade.

Continuing the discussion, Ambassador Rana aligned with Dr. Adlakha's observation regarding the scarcity of employment opportunities for highly educated graduates in China. He highlighted the role of the One-Child Policy in disseminating passivity and despondency among the youth in China. He argued that the current crisis could be an unanticipated consequence of this policy. Further, due to the significant wealth they inherit as the sole child in the family, most youth tend to develop a mindset of not needing to work.

Amb. Rana also drew a comparison between the situations in India and China. He noted that while the urge to go abroad has declined among the Chinese, more Indians are going abroad, particularly to the U.S. At the same time, unlike China, the Indian economy is growing at a

reasonable rate, and Indian youth are more willing to take up low-paying jobs in comparison to their Chinese counterparts.

The speakers reached a consensus that this subject requires thorough research, extending beyond economic considerations to encompass social, cultural, and policy dimensions. Acknowledging the significance of the subject, they agreed that research stemming from such discussions, which addresses the various facets of this complex issue, will hold considerable importance for both India and China.

The seminar featured an engaging Q&A session which ensued after the discussion. Numerous interesting questions were raised, including questions on the opportunities available to the youth in China, the impact of the crisis on rural youth, despondency in India, and the role of political parties in India in channelising youth movements. The speakers reiterated the prevalence of low-paying occupations among a significant portion of the Chinese youth and stated that the rural and urban populations in China are experiencing the crisis differently.

The session ended with an open-ended question raised by the Chair. Given the distinct systems and historical trajectories of China and India, she inquired as to which nation is better equipped to navigate the prevailing despondency within their respective youth populations, and what strategies they might employ to confront this crisis. Both Amb. Rana and Dr. Adlakha acknowledged the relevance of the question, and recognised the imperative need for further research on this subject. They emphasized the necessity for formulating a coherent strategy to address the crises in both India and China.

This report is prepared by Varsha Mishra, Research Intern at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

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