



Doing Field Work in China: Experiences on the Ground

Speaker: Dr. P.K. Anand

Chair: Tshering Chonzom

Date: 3rd July, 2019

Venue: Seminar Room, ICS

Dr. P.K Anand began by pointing out that his fieldwork was made possible by the China India Scholar Leaders Initiative Fellowship of the India China Institute, New York. He elaborated that the fellowship focuses on the theme of 'prosperity in inequality', which includes sectors such as education, technology and labour. Dr. Anand carried out his fieldwork in labour relations in the leather industry of China. More specifically, his fieldwork was focused on the Chinese leather footwear industry.

For the fieldwork two provinces were chosen, Wenzhou in Zhejiang, and Guangzhou in the Guangdong province. Wenzhou has a lot of cottage leather factories along with larger ones. He spent almost two weeks in both the cities. Apart from visiting a few factories he also visited the wholesale leather marts from where raw materials were procured by the factories. Most of the factories had relocated to the outskirts of the cities as there has been a growing concern about environmental degradation in China in recent years. Among the ones visited, a few factories had better waste disposal mechanisms where the chemicals are separated from water before it

was released back into the streams. The factories were either clustered in one block or at times even in a single building, where all the manufacturing took place.

An important part of the seminar was going through the process of conducting a research in China and Dr. Anand gave us a brief insight as to what it is like to carry out research in China. The approach used in this field work was participant observation, which according to Dr. Anand, has both negatives and positives. Given that the field trip was only for a few weeks, he didn't use a structured questionnaire, believing it does not generate the desired response. Instead he focused on face to face interactions and informal interviews.

He outlines three important prerequisites for carrying out any form of research in China:

- A) Contacts – means having enough people in the academic sector who can help the researcher in getting around and also help in getting over the language and cultural barriers
- B) Ample resources (Finances etc.) – It is very important to have a financial backing when going for research anywhere abroad
- C) Timing for research – Given the academic nature of the research, it was important that it was carried out when Chinese academic institutions were open and fully functioning

Another important point to be noted was the fact of respecting sensitivities while carrying out research that involved labour and making sure that the questions were not in any way insensitive to the beliefs of the people involved.

Comparing his findings in China with that of India, he found the following differences:

- A) Scale of manufacturing is much bigger in China, while space is a significant constraint in places like Mumbai
- B) Living and working spaces are intermeshed in India. There is a clear segregation in China
- C) Production in Mumbai is more informal and under the radar, in terms of taxes, supplies for production etc.

- D) Access to workers in Mumbai is better than in China, however, one still needs to contact them outside the workspaces to engage in a more free and honest communication.
- E) Worker's associations in Mumbai are more prevalent while there are fewer in the Chinese leather industry
- F) There is a stigma associated with the Indian leather industry that doesn't exist in China. In India only a few communities are involved in the leather goods manufacturing, with little technical know-how and a lack of a specific skill set
- G) Machinery use in Indian leather industry is less as compared to the Chinese one

This report was prepared by Hassaan Chishti, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

Disclaimer

This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.