



Mobility, Inequality and the Corona Crises

Speaker: Biao Xiang, Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Oxford

Chair: Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty, Honorary Fellow, ICS

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Venue: Zoom

Professor Biao Xiang started the seminar by emphasizing upon a shift from migration studies to mobility studies. In this light, the talk revolved around the subjects of livelihood mobility and the securitisation of mobility of migrants. The speaker opined that mobility is a means of survival and a strategy for adaptation during times of uncertainty. This explains the surge in movement of migrants during the pandemic as it seems the most rational choice.

In India, the movement, in fact, started before the total lockdown was announced by the government. Prof. Biao remarked that the fact that the government was unaware about the number of migrant workers comes as a surprise. He conceptualised the sudden movement of migrant workers back to the villages from the cities as a form of insurgency. However, this is not an insurgency against the government, political system or the laws but an insurgency by the migrant workers against their economic function in capitalism.

The talk brought attention to the economic function of the migrant workers who form the lowest level in the hierarchy of workers as most of them are from the unorganised sectors. They belong to the sector that always has to absorb the shock of any disturbance to the economy. This was observed during the 2008 Economic Crisis also when the construction workers had to face the largest impact of the poor performance of the economy. However, this time, the speaker noted that rather than absorbing the shock they have themselves become the shock.

An analogy was drawn between what happened in China during the SARS outbreak and what happened in India at the beginning of the outbreak of the Coronavirus. In both cases, a squeezing out of migrant workers could be observed. Professor Biao noted that in China, in the case of the recent Corona outbreak, the migrant workers were not mentioned until February when the government wanted them to come back to the city to resume work. According to him,

in China, mobility has become very generalised as it is not just the migrants but everyone is mobile. During the outbreak of the SARS virus in China, around 400000 migrants left cities. This movement was not triggered by the fear of the virus but because of the concern about livelihood and place of living as most of them lived in their work sites and the closing of the same rendered them homeless. Thus, migrant workers became the priority of the Chinese government and a comprehensive survey on migrant workers was started.

The movement of labour triggered fears regarding a spread of the virus. This was also due to the fact that this movement could not be monitored or controlled. Professor Biao highlighted the significance of securitisation of mobility in the future. This could be achieved through a point to point transport system for the labour, in which the migrants leave their homes, enter a bus or a train to finally enter the factory. This entire process is closed and monitored and has no stops in between. The transportation can be through chartered bus, train or even flights. This is the model adopted in Guangdong Province in China. Around five million migrant workers have been moved to the city through the point to point transport and sixty percent of these are new recruits. However, for this system to materialise, there is a requirement of an organised transport system.

The system of point to point transport utilises collective transport. This is facilitated through labour dispatch companies or what is known as human resource institutions. Today, they play the role of not only recruiters but also transporters. The labour dispatch companies find labour near the production site to avoid long distance travel. Transportation, this, instead of being a service outside production becomes a service that is part of the production process. According to the speaker, this leads to the securitisation of mobility.

The speaker also highlighted how labour-sharing was becoming an option under the current situation. It is a system in which a person can work in a firm while the contract with another firm still holds. This helps in the utilisation of laid-off labour. Intermediaries can be used to find and move labour as well as to move laid-off workers to other companies.

Professor Biao Xiang concluded his talk by predicting that after the lockdowns around the world are lifted, there will be another wave of migration from the city to the countryside due to unavailability of jobs which will be a direct result of the decrease or even absence of demand from the world, especially Europe. Thus, he once again, emphasized the importance of mobility of livelihood and the securitisation of mobility.

The discussion that followed the talk brought in various aspects and perspectives relating to migration, mobility and pandemic. Comments were made on the inadequacy of data on migrants and the fact that large scale official statistics do not give details regarding migrants which makes it difficult to categorise them. It was noted that unlike workers in India, workers in China are used to internal migration from as early as the 1950s as well as the interaction between local governments. Moreover, there is an essential difference in the characteristic of migration in India and in China. In China, the individual migrates where as in India, the entire family migrates. Another unique feature of the migrant in India that was identified during the discussion was that the income that they seek as labourers in the cities as to supplement the income generated from farmlands or the like in their villages. Because of this difference, the Chinese government was able to manage the sudden movement of workers in a better manner than the Indian government in the similar situation. The discussion also threw light upon the gender perspective of the topic. Going away for work or even eloping is largely seen to be used by women as an escape from the from the abuse that they might be facing in their domestic environment. With the lockdown due to the pandemic, the world has seen a surge in the domestic violence cases. This violence against women increases the need to establish and expand mobile means of livelihood for women workers.

Migrant labourers form a part of organised as well as unorganised sector with the majority in the latter. In the informal sector the workers are invisible due to which integrating them into a system becomes a difficult task. In India, the capacities are still under testing. The importance of securitisation of mobility and labour was reiterated. Intermediaries will gain importance after the pandemic especially in mobility. Both of these along with the casualisation of labour are important for the return of labour. Mobility requires the mobilisation of the civil society too. Security at all levels can be ensured giving the right to land ownership and the right to livelihood. In order for the economy to recover, emphasis must be given on investments. Like Professor Biao stated, pandemics cannot be won by just strong will but also by assessing, understanding and implementing.

*Report prepared by **Sanjana Krishnan**, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

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