



Panel's title : “Uprooted Peasants” or Modern City-dwellers? Rural/Urban Migration and the Making of Cityscapes in India.

Coordinator: Camille Buat (PhD Candidate in History, Centre d’Histoire de Sciences Po, Paris and Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen)

Language : English

Topics : Migration, Labour Studies, Urban Studies

Panel presentation :

From the mid-19th century onwards industrial and urban development in India has mostly relied on migrant workers. The migrant workers left their (usually rural) homes to be employed in a variety of fields, from large scale factories to the multitude of small scale activities constitutive of the urban economy. Drawing on ethnographic and historical perspectives, this panel will explore the experience of rural-urban migration as an enduring feature of the development and expansion of capitalism in India. It, specifically focuses on the migrant workers’ relationship to the city and the countryside in colonial and contemporary India. Should migrant workers be seen as “uprooted peasants”, temporarily inhabiting a place that doesn’t belong to them and where they don’t belong? Or is life and work in the city a breeding ground for new, modern subjects? The panel will look into the reconfiguration of the migrants’ relationship to the urban space over time, as it was shaped by long term economic, political and social trends.

The panel will demonstrate how the alleged weakness of the migrant labourer’s urban implantation has historically coexisted with a variety of endeavours to lay their claim to the urban spaces. This is described in the first two papers, first in the context of worker’s participation in the non-cooperation movement in the 1920s, and secondly at the critical transition of the 1940s and 1950s which witnessed a massive workers’ mobilisation on the housing question. Exploring the dichotomy between the village and the city, the third paper argues that circulatory practices contributed to a gendering of the rural/urban nexus, as migration has traditionally been framed as a male phenomenon. The fourth paper highlights a shift in this gendering of mobility linked to development of female circulatory practices, while stressing the way circulation involves a tension between the modern urban space and the traditional rural peripheries. Building on this dichotomy, the fifth paper explores the location of ‘traditional’ social institutions such as caste which scholars have historically expected to become irrelevant in modern urban settings.

Key words : migration, gender, labour, working class politics, caste, urban

Participants :

1) Robert Rahman Raman (PhD Candidate in History, Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen, Germany)

Communication's title : The Quest for Urban existence: Strikes, Popular Mobilisations and the Birth of *Girangaon* in the Post First World War Colonial Bombay

Language : English :



Presentation :

The end of the First World War marked a watershed moment, which ushered in an era of unprecedented and sustained visibility of labour on the urban political scene. Post-war Bombay was rocked by an unprecedented wave of strike actions by different sections of the labouring classes, which even after half a century of the industrialization remained largely migrant. This coincided with the Rowallat Satyagrah, non-cooperation movement and Khilafat agitation, and both currents of popular mobilisation at times blended into each other. The largely migrant workforce of Bombay was one of the prominent actors on this stage. With the gatherings of thousands of workers belonging to diverse socio-religious and regional backgrounds on the street and maidans of Bombay, urban spaces were reclaimed and turned into sites of popular protest. This paper examines the extent to which the political mobilization of the migrant workforce reconfigured the urban space of colonial Bomba. It will argue that, largely through its participation into the popular upsurges in the post war Bombay, the largely migrant working population of Bombay not only tried to assert their presence on the social and political landscape of Bombay but even began to carve out the spatial boundaries of Bombay's mill district, popularly known as *Girangaon*, which in Marathi means the 'village of textile mills'.

Key words : working class politics ; urban spaces ; anti-colonial movement

2) Dhiraj Kumar Nite (Assistant Professor, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India)

Communication's title : Worker Housing and the Politics of Reproduction: An Indian Coalfield (Jharia), 1940s–1950s

Language : English

Presentation :

This paper discusses migrant mineworkers' housing in the context of political and economic conditions of coalmining around Jharia in India during the 1940s–1950s. Most colliery workers were housed in one-roomed, overcrowded family tenements. From the latter 1940s, a form of bureaucratic paternalism shaped the responses of mining companies towards their workforce. The state introduced a paternalistic welfare-oriented inspectorate to monitor the industry's housing arrangement and instituted a welfare fund to develop the worker's houses. This led to a definite expansion of housing arrangements around Jharia. The state's paternalist welfare measures, this paper suggests, were in part a response to the militant housing struggles of workers. With a tradition of proletarianised male and female migrant mineworkers, being unionised, and mineworkers' quest for a respectable, humane and civilised form of life were responsible for sustained housing struggles on the Jharia coalfields. The welfarist intervention was, however, in part an expression of the state's political and ideological considerations. The relatively new independent state in India sought to harness the energy of colliery mineworkers for national reconstruction and the common good.

Key words : housing question, trade union, working-class politics, reproduction

3) Camille Buat (PhD Candidate in History, Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po, Paris and Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen)



Communication's title : Of Bounded Homes and Expanded Universes: Gender, Circulation and the Rural/Urban nexus

Language : English :

Presentation :

From the late 19th century onwards, migrant workers, many of them from the Bhojpuri speaking belt of northern India, flowed to the urban and economic centers of Eastern India, leading to the constitution of a rather stable circulatory regime as connections between, for instance, their village and a specific urban neighbourhood, even a specific mill or urban occupational cluster, were reproduced from one generation to the next. Drawing on oral histories and vernacular sources, the paper will argue that circulation contributed to the constitution of a specific, translocal space, as the city and the village existed in close connection with each other, drawn together by the constant coming and going of men. However, this space was experienced and represented as essentially gendered, as strong associations are made between women, the home, the familiar, and the inside, immobility and rootedness. This contributed to frame the rural/urban dichotomy as an opposition between the integrated universe of the men, spread over the town and the countryside, and the bounded space of women. Migration was seen to be an essentially male practice, while female migration was either overlooked, or described as auxiliary to that of men.

Key words : migration, urban, gender, rural/urban, modernisation

4) Saikat Maitra (Post-doctoral fellow in Anthropology, Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen)

Communication's title : "En-gendering Labor: Migration, Femininity and the Urban Question"

Language : English :

Presentation :

My paper explores the fashioning of a new labor-subjectivity amongst underclass female migrant workers employed in entry-level jobs in the emerging service industries in Kolkata, India. A cheap and disposable female workforce migrating from small towns around the peripheries of Kolkata is increasingly utilized in service spaces, such as shopping malls and upscale cafes. Work in these spheres of leisure and entertainment necessitates the complete reconfiguration of the workers' subjectivities including their bodily gestures, voice inflections and speech patterns to communicate tones of cosmopolitan living to customers. A void persists however between the luxurious work environments and realities of low wages, struggles in the city and the hardship of commuting. Moreover, constant tensions emerge for the female workers between their location in the city for work and the accusations of loose morality associated with the big city, which these women workers are often exposed to in their familial spaces of small towns and villages. Ethnographically, I focus on the migration and work experiences of these women workers to re-think the dialectics of 'home' and the 'world', the city and its peripheries to suggest how the vast mobility of women workers are gendering specific dimensions of urban migration in contemporary India.

Key words : urban, service labor, gender, development

5) Sumeet Mhaskar (Post-doctoral fellow in Sociology, Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen)



Communication's title : "En-gendering Labor: Migration, Femininity and the Urban Question"

Language : English :

Presentation :

The location of caste in urban industrial settings has historically evoked complex set of responses. Caste and untouchability has been considered as rural phenomenon. Interestingly, modernisation and Marxist theorists converged in their expectations on caste becoming irrelevant due to the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. The liberalisation of Indian economy since 1990s have provided grounds for similar expectations. Others have, however, contended that caste has been 'repeatedly reformulated in numerous ways' or has been 're-worked' in the changing social, economic and political context. Yet, there remains a major gap in the literature that explores the people's perceptions of caste in urban settings. This paper fills this gap by exploring rural labour migrants' perceptions about caste in Mumbai. The focus on rural migrant worker is important because it is this section of the workforce that is supposed to have experienced the declining influence of caste in the urban settings. This paper uses the survey data of 1033 single male migrant labourers that was conducted between March and May 2015.

Key words : migration, city, caste, modernization, social attitudes