



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Informal economy and migrant workforce in cities: Assessing Risk, Insecurity and Vulnerability among the urban poor in Post-Pandemic world

Organizer: Jyoti DAS, Pratisha BORBORAH

E-Mail Address: jyoti.das@cottonuniversity.ac.in

Abstract: More than half of the world's population today reside in cities. At one level of understanding this may denote economic growth. At another level, rapid urbanisation has introduced mankind to newer concepts of risk and vulnerability, challenging mainstream notions of growth and development. Rising population in cities include large number of migrated people who face multiple kinds of insecurities including health, income and housing as witnessed during Covid-19 pandemic. This rising urban population does not match the number of employment opportunities generally found in formal sector. Consequently, urban spaces have become breeding grounds of informal economies that quickly absorb the urban poor. It becomes pertinent to find out who are these urban poor and what are the mechanisms and processes that sustain this strata of society. Post covid work seems to have somehow come to its normal terms, though it still remains a question as to how do we make sense of informal workforce on the backdrop of continuously increasing job risks and other insecurities. Access to public space can be crucial for their livelihood activities but this access is controlled by state, market and wider society in diverse ways. In this context, the workshop will address following important questions (not limited to):(a)How do informal labours negotiate with different actors of development including state to achieve upward mobility?(b)What are the new methodologies that can aid multi-dimensional studies of urban poor? (c) How does intersectionality of class, caste, gender and ethnicity lead to formation of their community support systems, network and trust groups? The objective is to determine relevant methodologies to analyse the urban poor and also highlight the importance of considering these marginalised groups in both preventive and corrective policy formulations.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 2

Hui Wen: Market as Community: Exploring Senior Engagement in China's Informal Health Economies

Ioana Popescu: "They came to work". The production of vulnerability and irregularity within the Romanian migration infrastructure

Julio Armando Morales-Fonseca: Being Poor in Cartagena de India's (Colombia). Qualitative Perspectives on a Social Issue

Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 2 | Room 2

Malvya Chintakindi: Pursuing the "Good Life": Intersections of Caste, Class, and Gender in Urban Slums of India

Sanghita Datta: Unseen Journeys: Mapping the Marginalized in Darjeeling's Informal Workforce

Rachma Lutfiny Putri: Multi-layered Precariousness of Waste-picker Women in South Jakarta

SESSION PAPERS

Market as Community: Exploring Senior Engagement in China's Informal Health Economies

Hui Wen

Marginalized populations often recalibrate their societal roles and seek new forms of community and economic participation in precarious environments. This proposal explores how senior urbanites in China, who are not typically viewed as impoverished, experience marginalization and seek belonging by engaging with the burgeoning health supplements market, a significant segment of the informal economy in China.

This project studies the experiences of senior urbanites in their 70s-80s who have endured the nation's tumultuous history and their own physical hardships, and now face the challenges of aging. As these age cohorts retire with bodies worn by years of labor and historical upheavals, they seek familiar avenues for both physical care and a cure for the existential losses that accompany aging. However, they often find these paths futile—biomedicine only tells them chronic ailments are difficult to treat after numerous invasive tests. Moreover, within the family setting, they often feel undervalued and overlooked.

Meanwhile, the local health supplements market, with its unregulated and dubious reputation, surprisingly becomes a haven for seniors. Here, the seniors frequently engage in daily interactions that go beyond mere transactions. Activities such as promotional meetings, free massages, and casual conversations with salespeople and peers create a vibrant community hub. This is not just commerce, but also a reshaping of community dynamics where seniors are active participants.

These project demonstrates a critical aspect of how marginalized groups adapt and thrive within informal economies. For these seniors, the market serves as a site of social and

emotional exchange as much as economic transaction. Moreover, senior customers receive care and offer it to supplements salespeople in return, complicating current theorization on care as a one-dimensional dynamic. This mutual care fosters a sense of worth and community belonging, effectively turning the market into a critical social space that counters their otherwise marginal status.

“They came to work”. The production of vulnerability and irregularity within the Romanian migration infrastructure

Ioana Popescu

This qualitative research project examines the recent labor migration of South-Asian migrants to Romania, focusing on mapping the migration infrastructure that emerges in a country usually thought of as an emigration country rather than an immigration one.

Based on interviews with actors within the migration infrastructure and (non-)participant observation undertaken between January and April 2024, this study investigates (1) forms of precarity produced by the current structural configuration, which immobilizes them in insecure, irregular, and undocumented workplaces where the threat of deportation looms large; it explores how (2) “imaginaries” of “Romania as a European country” shape migrants’ motivations to undertake this journey, and also how (3) recruiters and employers’ own “imaginaries” consolidate the migrants as a “cheap” workforce. This research further situates these dynamics within the framework of racial capitalism, examining how forms of othering and essentialization are reproduced and exploited transnationally, for the sake of neoliberal economies.

Taken together, my research describes a new, yet familiar story of accumulation, within reconfigured labor frontiers. However, in addition to analyzing this case as a “new immigrant destination”, with its particular positionality at the “periphery” of Europe and with its (partially Schengen) border regime, this ethnography aims to document how migrants forge livelihoods despite the structural odds and imagines possible ties of solidarity between South-Asian and Romanian migrants, who share different yet parallel migration histories.

Being Poor in Cartagena de India’s (Colombia). Qualitative Perspectives on a Social Issue

Julio Armando Morales-Fonseca

This panel aims to describe some variables obtained from interviews and ethnographic interventions conducted with people from the city of Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). These variables allow for an emic interpretation of what it means to experience poverty in Cartagena, contrasted with official indicators. Theoretically, we interpret the results considering poverty as part of a system of social relations that is not only related to the amount of income and consumption of those who suffer from it but also as a structural and historical consequence of economic, political, and colonial relations.

Through an analysis of the emotional significances of some poverty experiences, the initial results show that the economic and emotional deprivations of a portion of Cartagena's population stem from a system of racial exclusion that persists to this day. In this way, I argue that being poor in Cartagena: 1) is worse if you are black or a woman;

2) means being spatially segregated; 3) means living with many people in cramped and precarious houses, infested with pests, with deficiencies in public services; 4) means having no privacy at home; 5) means feeling shame; 6) means not having luxuries; instead, it means having bread and milk for breakfast, not eating meat, not having a television or refrigerator, walking instead of using transportation, and not enjoying the city's beaches

In sum, being poor in Cartagena goes beyond the economic determinants of individuals or households who experience it: it is also a product of structural relations of marginalization and oppression that must be considered.

Pursuing the “Good Life”: Intersections of Caste, Class, and Gender in Urban Slums of India

Malvya Chintakindi

My ethnographic inquiry investigates how class, caste and gender intersect in urban slums of Hyderabad, South India, to shape aspirations for a “good life” for lower caste (Dalit, historically categorized as untouchables) women engaged in the informal labor sector, which constitutes a whopping 80% of the Indian workforce. Responding to the critical need for an intersectional analysis of the structural inequalities Dalit women face, I examine how the precarity of labor informality renders them multiply vulnerable. My research centers the voices of Dalit women informal workers, long invisible in policy discourse, highlighting local labor regimes in the global south. My research focuses on the goal to contribute to the anthropological discourse on “good life” in the context of urban slums in India, specifically focusing on how Dalit women aspire, experience stress and trauma, make choices, demonstrate resilience and develop avenues of resistance amidst their multiple vulnerabilities in terms of caste, class and gender discrimination and the fragility of the informal labor sector. I seek to offer a nuanced understanding of the lived realities of these women and offer insights into effective policy and intervention approaches. Integrating the traditional advantages of studying caste into an examination of class issues, my research focuses on aspects of caste and class consciousness, which are often discussed ambiguously in Indian anthropological literature. I investigate the role of urban employers, state and non-state actors, and urban living standards in creating Dalit women’s aspirations for “good life”. I explore Dalit women’s resistance strategies and coping mechanisms in the context of post-pandemic realities. Engaging with anthropology, anthropology of labor, subaltern and public policy studies, I employ multi-modal research methodologies of participant observation, interviews, social mapping, group discussions, and photo voice.

Unseen Journeys: Mapping the Marginalized in Darjeeling’s Informal Workforce

Sanghita Datta

The strategic position of Darjeeling district of West Bengal, has been home to cross-border settlers for many decades. This paper delves into the intricate network of the informal workforce who have migrated and settled there from the 1960s onwards, bringing forward the complex realities of informal labor. They have crossed the Bangladesh border, entered illegally, and settled in and around the river Balasone in Matigara. Most of them are engaged in stone-cutting jobs in the river. The empirical

foundation relies on the 283 household surveys among the people living on both sides of the river and various small ghettos offering a critical lens on the marginalized lived experiences.

Through a mixed method approach, the study unveils the intricate dynamics that perpetuate their invisibility, probing the intersection of socio-economic factors, power structures and policy gaps. In a broader sense, an attempt is made to understand the migration patterns and settlements in Darjeeling. By capturing the voices and experiences of these individuals, the research strives to provide an understanding of the challenges they continue to face, shedding light on the issues related to livelihood, access to resources, their contribution in the informal economy and all these in the constant absence of formalized social protections.

Multi-layered Precariousness of Waste-picker Women in South Jakarta

Rachma Lutfiny Putri

This research discusses the livelihood of waste-picker women, their labor process and multi-layered precariousness, and everyday strategies to mitigate their life challenges in Kampung Pendar, an urban poor neighborhood in South Jakarta. Despite the essential value of their waste-picking work and contribution to the neighborhood cleanliness, waste recycling process, and urban sustainability in Jakarta, their works are stigmatized and undervalued by society and the local government.

Based on a three-month ethnographic observation of the lived experiences of waste-picker women and men in Gasong and additional interviews with local community brokers and government officers, this study shows the multi-layered precariousness that the waste-picker women face and the specificity of their labor process and experience compared to the male waste-pickers. Three factors, namely working conditions, social stigmas, and the burden of social reproduction or domestic work have a significant influence on the state of precariousness of the waste-picker women in Gasong.

Although their lives are precarious, waste-picker women have their own livelihood and working strategies to survive life challenges and formulate their own understanding about their lives. By putting their experience in conversation with discussions on workers' precariousness, social stigma faced by the working-class, social reproduction, and Scottian hidden transcript, this study attempts to present a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of waste-picker women in Indonesia and contemporary Global South and their crucial role in urban life in megacities.

Keywords: Waste-picker women, multi-layered precariousness, social reproduction, lived experience, Indonesia, Global South.