Local labour regimes and the agency of construction workers in Chennai, South India
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The construction industry in India is one of the largest sources of employment in the country, but it is weakly regulated by labour legislation. As a consequence, construction workers are hired informally, their employment is unprotected and they do not have access to social security in cases such as unemployment, illness, injury, regency and old age. In Tamil Nadu, construction workers started to organise collectively into trade unions in the early 1980s and demanded a comprehensive legislation to be implemented in the construction industry. The state government responded in 1982 by enacting a legislation to improve the conditions of different groups of informal workers, among them construction workers. This act, however, was never implemented. Instead, the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Welfare Board was established in 1994 to provide welfare schemes. The Board is governed as a tripartite institution with representatives from unions, employers and the state government, but does not play any role in the regulation of employment and the welfare schemes do not contain substantial social security.

Through a qualitative case study of the construction industry in Chennai, the state capital of Tamil Nadu, the aim of this thesis is to explain opportunities for – and constraints to construction workers’ agency by examining how employment arrangements and welfare provisions were regulated and negotiated. The data material consists of interviews with workers, union leaders, employers and government officials, as well as documentary sources, collected during the period 2007-2010. I use local labour regime as an analytic frame to approach the interaction between labour regulation, labour control and workers’ agency on different geographical scales. In dialogue with theoretical perspectives on the informal economy and literature on the politics of work and welfare in India, I develop a contextual explanation of processes that conditioned the agency of construction workers in Chennai and the ways they themselves shaped their working lives.

The thesis argues that alliances between employers, certain union leaders and politicians on a regional scale have facilitated the implementation of welfare schemes, but also prevented more structural changes in labour regulation. By accommodating some of the welfare demands from the unions, labour regulation could be kept at a minimum. Another constraint to the collective agency of construction workers was the fragmented union landscape, caused by differences in political orientation and also to the proliferation of unions organising informal workers.
Still, the welfare schemes worked as an organising tool for the unions, which were able to influence the state government to a certain degree. Moreover, my two case study unions played a key role as intermediaries of welfare provisions including accident compensation from employers. Hence, I identify a union-influenced labour regime in the neighbourhoods, recruitment sites and workplaces of local workers residing in Chennai on a permanent basis. In comparison, at two large construction sites within Greater Chennai, I identify a migrant-based labour regime, characterised by the absence of unions, lower wages, longer hours of work and lack of access to welfare schemes.

I relate the differences between the two regimes to local and migrant workers’ varying degrees of spatial embeddedness. While it is often argued that labour market intermediaries prevent collective organising, I demonstrate that the ambiguous positionality and multiple roles of local labour contractors operating as intermediaries between the formal and informal spheres were important to understand the unionisation of construction workers in Chennai. Furthermore, I show that the recruitment sites of local workers were regulated by social rules and practices, and to some extent union involvement, which increased their bargaining power as compared to the migrant workers. At the same time, the asymmetrical relations between labour contractors and labourers also constrained the room for manoeuvre in negotiating employment arrangements, and tendencies towards hierarchy and dependence were replicated in the unions.

To bring out these complexities, I argue that it is necessary to focus on regulatory processes and multiple forms of worker agency that manifest in the production and reproduction locales, both on regional and local scales.