

Speaker: Simpreet Singh, Housing Rights Activist based in Mumbai

Title of the Lecture: Politics of the Civil Society and Civility of the Political Society

Venue: Conference Hall, Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta (Alipur Campus, Second Floor)

Date & Time: 31 July 2014 at 3 p.m.

Abstract:

As India takes an urban turn, *city* becomes the idea that has caught the imagination of the policy makers, academicians and the general public. Over the years the discourse has revolved around the idea of city and it informs many of the debates that are shaping our reality presently.

Within this context is the idea and imagination of the people that dwell in city. Drawing from the experiences of urban poor of Kolkata, scholar Partha Chatterjee has suggested the presence of two segments (the civil society and the political society) within which the city dwellers can be located since they have few distinct characteristics which are exclusive of each other.

For the lecture, I draw upon my experiences and learning's as an activist with a housing rights movement in Mumbai to critically engage with the idea of civil and political society to bring forth the point that the civil society is not that civil as Chatterjee wants us to believe. Rather it engages into a politics that is informed by its own self interests and excludes and violates the vast majority of the other i.e. the urban toiling masses, that according to Chatterjee constitutes the political society.

The experience of Mumbai which can be said to be true for other cities also informs us that the city dwellers can be understood as constituting different classes and interests and all engaging into politics to make claim to the city and in contestation with the other. Politics thus is not the exclusive domain of one particular group or section. Rather, the elite and the privileged (that constitute the civil society) are able to have their say in the city many a times, although have to face firm resistance and contestation by the urban poor. This postulate will be illuminated by number of field experiences and anecdotes.