



Getting Home During Lockdown: Circular migration and hyper-precarity in rural Tamil Nadu at the time of Covid-19

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Research context

- ▶ Tiruppur textile region in Tamil Nadu, South India
 - ▶ Focus on interstate migrants (Bihar and UP) working in powerlooms and sizing mills
- ▶ Migrant workers:
 - ▶ Men, mainly young and unmarried (age 16 onwards)
 - ▶ Provided accommodation on site, next to units, but live segregated from local workers and villagers
 - ▶ Working 12-hour shifts, 7 days/week, 30 days/month.



Three interrelated conceptual frameworks:

1) **Local labour control regimes:** Employment of flexible and informal labour is a core strategy of capital to reduce production costs and enhance control over labour, incl. migrant labour (Fudge 2019).

2) **“Hyper-precarity”:** captures the compounded precarity of migrant workers: Class-based extraction and exploitation; Migration-related exploitation; and Identity-based discrimination and exploitation (Lewis et al 2015; Lerche and Shah 2018).

3) **Social reproduction of circular migrants:** hyper-precarity of migrants is further entrenched by the separation of the productive and reproductive spheres (Fraser 2016, Mezzadri 2017, 2020).

Methodology

- ▶ Mid-way through a 2-year project on skills, social networks and labour markets (July '19 - March '20)
- ▶ Surveys and qualitative interviews, but cut short due to Covid-19 in March 2020
- ▶ Switched over to phone-based interviews with local villagers (S. Yuvaraj) in spring 2020 and then with migrant workers (Nidhi Subramanyam) in July 2020
- ▶ Here: migrant narratives of their experiences of lockdown in TN

Four phases emerged

1. Immediate aftermath of lockdown
2. Journeys home
3. Surviving back at home
4. Planning to return to Tamil Nadu



1 - Immediate aftermath of lockdown

- ▶ 25th March 2020 - all work ceased and migrant workers were 'stuck' in their factory rooms, without cash
- ▶ Employers provided food or money for food, but this was deducted from outstanding wages!
- ▶ Crucially, employers initially tried to keep hold of migrant workers: they kept them on site, withheld wages due from previous months, and refused to support return journeys
- ▶ No food provisions through local state resources; marginal to village life
- ▶ All became increasingly desperate to return home - fear and anxiety
- ▶ Ranjit: *if the owner had allowed us to return then [at the start of lockdown], I could have returned with Rs 2,500 by train. But he didn't allow us to leave and made us stay forcibly. Since we are poor and helpless, we had to stay.*

2 - Journeys home

- ▶ **Shramik Special trains from 1st May 2020**
 - ▶ Anand: secured a free travel pass, with food and water
 - ▶ Sanjeev: paid Rs 2000 for train ticket
 - ▶ Logesh: filled multiple forms but didn't get ticket
- ▶ **Hiring private buses (May-June 2020)**
 - ▶ Groups of workers (paid Rs 8-10,000 per seat)
 - ▶ Logesh: was owed Rs 5000 in unpaid wages; given some money for food; mother sent Rs 8,700 for bus
 - ▶ Danvir: owed wages; no money for food; family back home borrowed Rs10,000 for return ticket
- ▶ Eventually, employers let them go, BUT without settling their wages. They made promises to pay their wages when they reached home *or* on return to TN.



3 - Surviving back in the village

- ▶ Some workers' families owned land and coped better
- ▶ Landless families - no income at all; no work opportunities; reliant on parents' casual work
- ▶ Increased borrowing

Manish: We are wage labourers, only if we work, we can eat ... we have not earned a single rupee for the last 2-2.5 months. Even now we are struggling for food. Our problems haven't gone away. We are somehow getting by. We take Rs 500-1000 from here and there and run the house.

4 - Future plans

- ▶ By July 2020 all were contemplating returning to Tamil Nadu; 'lives on hold'; not *whether* to return, but *when* and *how*
- ▶ Strategies of employers changed: due the renewed need for labour, they tried to lure workers back:
 - ▶ phone calls;
 - ▶ offers of transport;
 - ▶ reassurances about settling withheld wages;
 - ▶ promises about increased daily wage rates.
- ▶ Some started travelling back to Tamil Nadu as soon as July 2020, but others were hesitant given the many uncertainties ahead.

Some conclusions

- ▶ During the first lockdown, employers' labour control regime drew on flexible strategies aimed at:
 - first retaining workers at the start of lockdown,
 - then disposing of them when factories lay idle,
 - finally luring them back when production was restarted.
- ▶ Those strategies constituted a local labour control regime that produced the simultaneous disposability and unfreedom of migrant workers.
- ▶ The spatio-temporal separation of migrant workers from their home-based kin networks *and* their lack of social support at destination exposed them to exploitation at the hands of their employers.
- ▶ Their hyper-precarity thus resulted from class-based exploitation, complemented with a spatially-enabled form of exploitation, and left them with little care, protection or patronage at the time of crisis.