



# 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

- ▶ 25<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.