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 1 (h)Ccs1 (er)-1 ()-5en yhr

# 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

# 2 - Journeys home

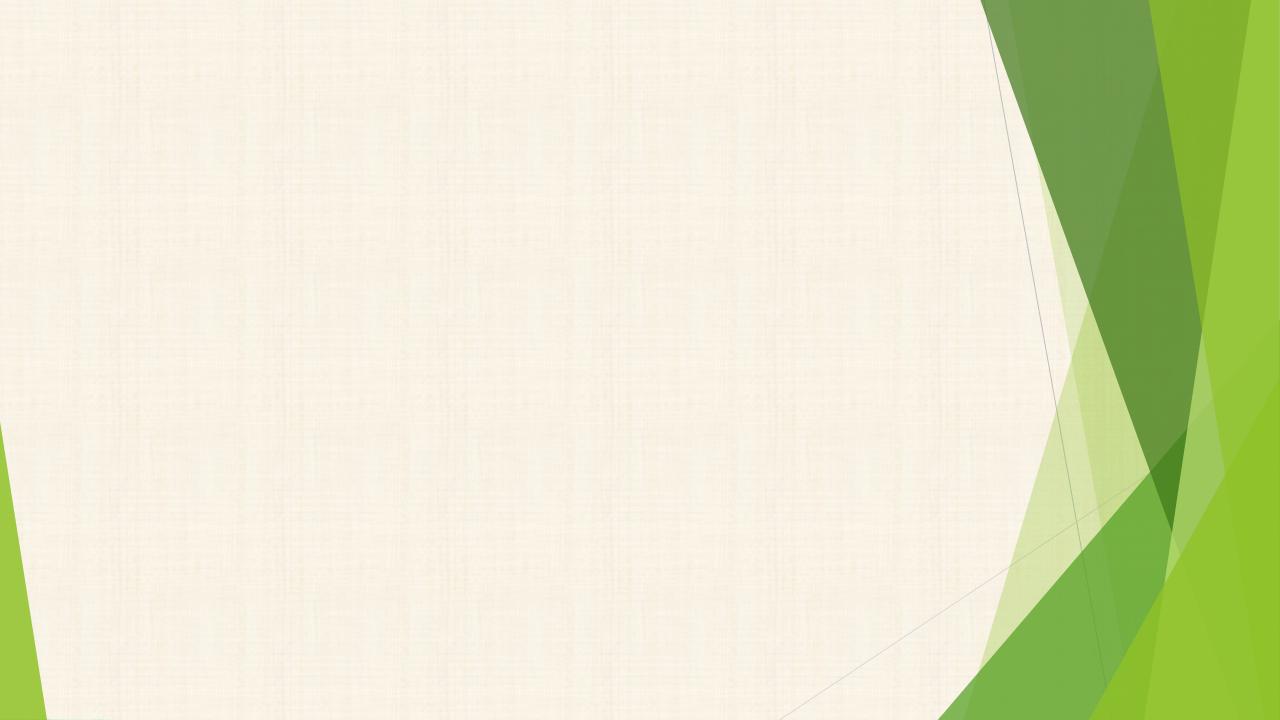
Shramik Special trains from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020

- 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.





## 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 <u>disposability</u> and un (at3.1 )0.83 (te)3d.83 (te h Tc 0 TwmxSo7 T3m Tc 0 Tw)