

**Not working for export markets: work, agency and livelihoods  
in the Tiruppur textile region**

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*Abstract: Despite pervasive changes brought about by the rise in export industries, relatively little is known about their broader effects. Recent literature on global production networks (GPNs) has both called for attention to be paid to labour and argued that there is a need to embed labour agency into GPNs. This paper argues that the type and extent of labour agency is not only shaped by institutional forms of organisation, but also by the livelihood choices and possibilities available to workers. Drawing on evidence from two villages in southern India which are both close to, and deeply affected by, a major textile industry cluster, the paper examines how the availability of non-agricultural work in the area has affected the livelihoods of those living in the region. Instead of focussing on labourers working within the export industry this paper principally looks at those indirectly affected by the GPN, particularly looking at changes to the livelihoods of agricultural labourers in the region around the cluster. The paper looks at three aspects of livelihoods: wages (and how wages in agriculture are affected by the availability of non-agricultural work); the nature of labour arrangements (and changes to how labourers are hired, and under what conditions); and thirdly, broader aspects of livelihoods that are important to the people involved (well-being, respect, value, status, and the quality of relationships). It argues that understanding these broader aspects of livelihood change – the indirect effects of a rise in labour intensive export industries – is central to how we conceptualise workers' agency and consider the wider impacts of GPNs. It is argued that workers' agency can only be understood with the framework of changing livelihoods.*

*Key words:* India, global production networks, labour, agency, livelihoods

The emerging literature on global value chains and global production networks (Nadvi 2004; Henderson *et al* 2002; Coe *et al* 2004) often calls for greater attention to be paid to labour (e.g. Nadvi and Thoburn 2004; Coe, Dicken and Hess 2008). A recent review of labour geographies literature argues that it is important to embed labour agency into global production networks (GPNs) (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010). Coe and Jordhus-Lier argue that workers are 'inevitably, but differentially, positioned' within GPNs and labour agency needs to be embedded in GPNs to help 'reveal the

variegated landscape for agency potential across different sectors' and the 'massively different levels of potential agency *within* functionally integrated economic networks' (2010: 11-12). Workers are embedded in social networks, and social relations shape labour agency's potential, while workers' actions are shaped by their multiple identities of gender, caste, class and religion (Nightingale 2010). Looking at informal, unorganised rural workers, rather than formal, unionised workers within a network, this paper explores how a GPN affects workers' livelihoods and their agency. But while the labourers under discussion *are affected by* the GPN (in the form of the Tiruppur garment cluster), they are themselves *outside it*.<sup>1</sup> Focussing on those who are *not* working in the nearby industrial cluster, the paper looks at the agricultural workers whose working lives are increasingly affected by the cluster.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas the livelihoods of those employed in export industries have received some attention (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Barrientos, Dolan and Tallontire 2003; Nadvi 2004; Jenkins 2004; Roberts and Thoburn 2003; Riisgaard 2009), the livelihoods of those excluded from them or indirectly affected by them, remain unexplored. This paper will argue that understanding the indirect, or 'knock-on', effects of a rise in labour intensive export industries on labour and livelihoods allows us to grasp labour's agency potential as well as the wider impacts of GPNs. Drawing on evidence from two villages in southern India which are both close to, and deeply affected by, a major textile export cluster, this paper examines how the availability of

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<sup>2</sup> For more on those working within the industry see forthcoming work by Carswell and De Neve.

non-agricultural work in the area has affected the livelihoods of those living in the region. It argues that the availability of non-agricultural work has an effect on wages in agriculture and the nature of working arrangements, but in complex and differentiated ways. But it goes further, arguing that incomes and living standards are only part of the story, and broader aspects of well-being that are so important to the people involved (such as respect, value, status, the quality of relationships etc) have also changed and the nature of those changes need to be considered.

Understanding changes to these different aspects of livelihoods is central to understanding agency.

Literature on workers in GPNs has tended to focus on those workers directly employed in the industry - for example, in horticulture (Dolan 2001; Dolan 2004; Barrientos and Kritzing 2004; McCulloch and Ota 2002), cut-flowers (Riisgaard 2009) and agri-food networks (Gwynne 1999), while there is little on those *indirectly* affected by export industries. Beyond the GPN literature there is a wide literature on rural growth linkages, which looks at growth in agriculture providing the stimulus for growth in rural non-farm activities and the multiplier effects on income (Mellor 1976; Haggblade and Hazell 1989; Hazell and Ramaswamy 1991). More specifically the effect of the availability of off-farm incomes on agricultural workers through the tightening of the labour market has also received much attention in the Indian context. For example, Lanjouw and Murgai's analysis of five rounds of NSS data revealed a 'positive effect of nonfarm employment growth on agricultural wages' as the 'expansion of the non-farm sector appears to put pressure on wage rates in agriculture' (2008: 25). The contribution of the non-farm sector to real wage increases (versus changes in agricultural productivity driving agricultural wage

growth) has been the subject of some debate (see for example, Foster and Rosenzweig 2004; Eswaran *et al* 2009). Within the GPN literature, however, these linkages between agriculture and non-agriculture have been largely ignored, and it is the aim of this paper to consider them within a GPN framework.

Moreover, this paper argues that the availability of non-farm work has broader effects beyond those on wages. As others have observed across India transformations in agricultural labour arrangements have in part, at least, been associated with the increased availability of work outside agriculture (Breman 1993; Lerche 1999; Ruthven and Kumar 2002; Rao 1999). Furthermore, greater recognition is increasingly being given to the importance of non-economic dimensions of livelihoods. Sen has written extensively on freedom 'to chose a life one has reason to value' (1999, 2009), while the concept of well-being (see Gough and McGregor 2007) is increasingly being put forward as central to 'how we think about, measure and do 'development' (McGregor and Sumner 2010). Three-dimensional well-being, involving material, relational and subjective dimensions shifts the focus beyond incomes to 'a more rounded account of what people can do and be, and how they evaluate what they can do and be' (McGregor and Sumner 2010). Amongst geographers, particularly those working in the field of migration, attention has been paid to the broader effects of export industries, and in particular the non-economic dimensions of livelihoods (Elmhirst 2007; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Knight and Gunatilaka 2010 ). For example, 'self-worth', 'a sense of being valued', greater potential for independence and changes in the relations between different caste groups were some of the factors that were important for migrant workers in West Bengal (Rogaly and Coppard 2003). Other

studies highlight the importance of not being immediately identified, and therefore stigmatized, as lower caste (Breman 1996) and escaping the goading of higher caste farm employers (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Furthermore, migrant workers adopt new ways of dressing, speaking and consuming, so challenging social hierarchies through 'aesthetic transgressions' (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003).

Focusing on two villages located within 20km of the booming textile town of Tiruppur, the paper asks what it means to have a major industry on the doorstep. How do the lives of workers change? What is the impact on their well-being? How has the relationship between agricultural workers and their employers changed? Agriculture in Tiruppur's hinterland, and the lives of agricultural workers, underwent change long before the growth and development of the textile industry (Baker 1984; Beck 1979; Cederlof 1997; Washbrook 1993). Commercial agriculture expanded from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the introduction of Cambodia variety of cotton from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the expansion of land under cotton, fed by wells, while tobacco was also well-suited to the region (Baker 1984). Agriculture was 'revolutionised' in the 1950s and the 1960s with the introduction of electric pumpsets for well irrigation, new seed varieties, fertilisers and pesticides (Harriss 1982; Harriss-White 1996; Hazell *et al* 1991; Heyer 2000b). However, from the 1970s onwards, agricultural development slowed down as the water table fell and wells dried up (Saravanan 2001; Janakarajan and Moench 2002; Janakarajan 2004). Land was taken out of cultivation and cropping patterns changed significantly. The numbers employed in agriculture decreased sharply, while at the same time agricultural labour costs rose (Heyer 2000a and 2000b).

In the Tiruppur region, these more recent agricultural changes coincided with a boom in the textile industry from the 1970s onwards and a rapid increase in urban job opportunities (Chari 2004), which attracted both agricultural labourers and landowners.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that the textile industry consists of two major parts: the (largely Tiruppur-based) garment industry and the (largely village-based) powerloom industry. These two arms of the textile industry are different in many ways: how they are structured, the labour relations within them, the nature of labour contracts and so on. While the Tiruppur industry is based around the production of ready-to-wear knitted garments (eg T-shirts, pyjamas etc) for both the domestic market and the export market, the powerloom industry produces woven fabric, which is largely sold in the Indian market for further processing. As both arms of the textile industry have grown, so many villages have become increasingly industrialised with spreading non-agricultural employment and growing commuter populations. Heyer notes that the villages she studied 20-30km northwest of Tiruppur had few non-agricultural manufacturing activities in 1981 and no commuters, but by 1996 there were power-loom units, elastic factories, a knitwear factory and commuting was widespread (2000b). Villages closer to the main roads have undergone even more dramatic transformations.

The research was carried out in two villages which we call Allapuram and Mannapalayam to the south of Tiruppur. These villages were selected in part because of the different ways that they are linked and affected by Tiruppur. Both are

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<sup>3</sup> The extent to which these urban job opportunities are available to everyone in the villages is beyond the scope of this paper (see forthcoming work by Carswell and De Neve). However, it is worthy of note that the entry barriers to Dalits are not water-tight, and there are significant numbers of Adi Dravidas working in the garment industry, as well as Matharis. Labourers in the powerloom industry, meanwhile, are predominantly local Dalit men and women, as well as migrants from across the castes.

about the same distance from the town – under 20 km - but the linkages with the town and industry are very different. Firstly, Allapuram is a village that is irrigated by the PAP canal, and is known as an area with a successful and viable agricultural sector. But it is also a village which sends significant numbers of commuters (across castes) to work in the Tiruppur garment industry. Well connected to Tiruppur a town bus goes through the village every half hour and there are an estimated 15 different company vans that pass through the village to collect and drop commuters for work in Tiruppur.

The second village, Mannapalayam, is located about 15 km south of Tiruppur, but is poorly connected to it with no direct government buses or company vans passing through the village. This village is also partly irrigated by the PAP canal, but the most important thing about Mannapalayam – which indeed dominates the village – is the powerloom industry. Here, Gounder landowners began to set up small-scale powerloom units from the early 1970s, and today 67% of landowners also run powerlooms, with anything from 6-50 looms. As you walk through the village the incessant noise of the looms is impossible to ignore and one is constantly struggling to make oneself heard above this noise. And so this village is first and foremost a powerloom village. In both localities we carried out a household survey<sup>4</sup> and undertook detailed in-depth field research over a period of about a year, conducting interviews with a large number of farmers, agricultural labourers, garment and powerloom workers and owners.

## **Setting the scene**

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<sup>4</sup> In total we surveyed 251 households in Allapuram (100% of the village – all households on school census, plus others not listed) and 279 households in Mannapalayam (50% of households on school census plus 88 households not listed).

In both villages the land owning Gounders (BC) make up the dominant caste in terms of economic wealth and political power, while Matharis (Dalits) are the poorest and socially lowest ranking caste of the region (see Table I). With its large migrant population, Mannapalayam is the more socially diverse of the two villages, and it is dominated by the powerloom industry.

*Table I - The two villages*

	Allapuram	Mannapalayam
Dominant land-owning caste	Gounders (27% of hhs)	Gounders (33% of hhs)
Dalit groups	Adi Dravida Christians (24% of hhs) Matharis (22% of hhs)	Dalits 39% (Mix of Matharis and other Dalits from migrant population)
Main activities	Agriculture Commuting to Tiruppur	Powerlooms Agriculture
Migrants	Very few migrants	Large population of migrants
% of land owned by Gounders	94%	98%
% of landowners with well	87%	98%
% of PWL units (looms) owned by Gounders	NA	90% of units (96% of looms)

In both villages Gounders are economically dominant in terms of control over agricultural assets: they own most of the land and most of the borewells. Similarly, in



Mannapalayam Gounders dominate the powerloom industry, owning most of the units. Some powerloom units are located within the village itself and the owners of these units usually employ local Mathari workers who live in the village's Dalit colony. Other Gounders have established powerloom units on their *thottams* (farms) surrounding the village and they employ mainly migrant workers, for whom they provide *in situ* housing. Powerloom workers, in contrast to workers in the garment industry, are paid advances which serve to 'tie' workers to the powerloom owners, and which we argue elsewhere forms a type of neo-bondage.<sup>5</sup>

The major crops grown in the area include maize, *cholam* (sorghum), coconut, tobacco, onion, tomatoes and other vegetables. Agriculture is irrigated by open wells, borewells and (in Allapuram and parts of Mannapalayam) the PAP canal. This canal only receives water for five months once every two years and during this time farmers receive it in turn. Canal water is seen as being insufficient and unreliable and this, combined with falling water tables, means that for many years the 'water problem' was the main issue for agriculturalists. But today, while water is still frequently mentioned as a problem, the main concern for agriculturalists, which dominates discussions about agriculture, is the 'labour problem', and indeed labour shortages are central to decisions made in agriculture today.

### **Livelihoods in the villages**

In both villages livelihoods are made through involvement in the textile sector and agriculture. In Allapuram agriculture is the first source of income for 45% of households (with 22% getting it from agricultural products produced by the

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<sup>5</sup> For further details see Carswell and De Neve (under review) 'From Field to Factory'.

household, and 23% from working as agricultural labourers). But for a substantial 25% of households the primary source of income is from the textile industry (in this case Tiruppur-based garment work), and a further 15% cited garment work as the secondary source of income.<sup>6</sup> For certain groups within this village Tiruppur work is even more central to their livelihoods (for example 46% of Christian Adi Dravidas have garments as their primary source of income, with a further 11% citing it as their second most important source of income). In Mannapalayam an even higher percentage (55%) of all households have their primary source of income from the textile industry (in this case the village-based powerloom factories). Here agriculture is still the primary source of income for 22% of households, and agricultural *coolie* work is the single most important secondary source of income.

Agriculture is important for – broadly speaking – two groups: farmer landowners (Gounders) and agricultural *coolie* workers, that is casual labourers, and it is the latter that this paper focuses on. It is striking (but not surprising) that agricultural *coolie* work is most important for women, Dalits and those with least education. As Harriss-White found elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, women dominate the labour input into agriculture, ‘provid[ing] over half of all farm labour’ (2004: 172). In both our villages most *coolie* workers were women (56% in Allapuram and 57% in Mannapalayam). But this is varied by caste, and it is clear that Dalits dominate the agricultural labour force. In Mannapalayam 72% of *coolie* workers are Dalits, while in Allapuram 85% of

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<sup>6</sup> We believe that if anything this figure is likely to underestimate the involvement in the textile industry, as many young men involved in the industry only contribute a small part of their wages to household income. Indeed 45% of households in Allapuram have an individual who has a primary or secondary activity within the garment sector. Additionally, some of those who defined their activity as ‘other’ are in textile-related jobs – such as driver, nightwatchman etc.

*coolie* workers are Dalits (63% Mathari, and 22% Adi Dravida).<sup>78</sup> A high proportion of *coolie* workers have absolutely no education: in Mannapalayam 61% have no education (compared to 32% of the total adult population), while in Allapuram 69% of *coolie* workers have no education (compared to 37% of the total adult population.) So the evidence suggests that agricultural *coolie* work is particularly important for Dalits, for women, and for those with little or no education.

How, then, has the availability of garment work in Tiruppur, and powerloom work in Mannapalayam, affected the lives of those involved in agriculture? How have they experienced these changes? What choices do they now face? As job opportunities in textiles have multiplied (in both the Tiruppur garment factories, and in village-based powerlooms in the region) they have had an effect on wider rural labour markets. Other non-farm economic activities besides the textile sector have also contributed to the tightening of the labour market: involvement in trade, construction and services are all relevant, but are dwarfed by the importance of the textile sector in these two villages. Changes to wage rates, as well as changes in labour arrangements (working hours, payment methods etc.) will now be explored.

In both villages landowners talk incessantly about the 'labour problem.' As one wealthy Gounder landowner in Allapuram said 'Earlier we had a labour shortage, but

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<sup>7</sup> Looking at primary source of income we find that in Mannapalayam 78% of households for whom agricultural labour is the first source of income are Dalits, in Allapuram 84% are Dalits (65% being Matharis, and 19% Adi Dravidas). The differences within the Dalit community are clear, but are beyond the scope of this paper. In Allapuram 60% of Mathari women have agriculture as their main activity, compared to only 21% of Adi Dravida women. Adi Dravidas in Allapuram are Christians and have a longer history of access to education, which appears to be important. Furthermore, amongst the Adi Dravida Christians a high percentage of men have relatively well paid, often government jobs (which is, of course, itself related to access to education), which has resulted in Adi Dravida women withdrawing themselves from agricultural work. This analysis was done on all the adult individuals that we surveyed in Allapuram – 696 individuals over the age of 14, the legal definition in terms of child labour.

<sup>8</sup> Bringing caste and gender together, our data shows that while Dalit women make up only 17% of the adult population in Mannapalayam, they form 42% of the *coolie* population.

now it is really bad. Now only old people are doing agriculture and as they get very old they don't have stamina to work, and so agriculture is reducing.' Linking this directly to the availability of non-agricultural jobs, another farmer explained '99% of people don't want to do agriculture. From young to old, everyone wants to go to *banian* [garment] factories.' Indeed, in these two villages the aspiration to move out of agriculture is widespread across castes.<sup>9</sup> Many aspects of working conditions in agriculture, compared to elsewhere, are unattractive. Agricultural workers spend all day out in the hot sun, compared to work in Tiruppur factories or powerloom units where people work in the shade, under a fan. Agricultural workers dress in old clothes and get dirty, compared to factory workers who are 'neat', and the term *nagaarikam* (civilisation; sophistication) is closely associated with working in Tiruppur. As a Gounder couple told me: 'People look neat even if they are poor if they work in a company. But in agriculture even the rich look shabby and muddy once they go to the fields and people think they are poor.' Gopalakrishnan, a 36 year old Mathari man in Mannapalayam explained: 'My father worked in agriculture, and he didn't want me to suffer so he sent me to powerlooms.' Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu Anandhi has similarly noted that Dalit youth, looking for non-agricultural work outside the village, seek to 'break away from the history of subordination of their fathers and grandfathers, which is closely tied to agricultural work' (2002: 4400), and I return to this later. Even wealthy Gounders were explicit about looking for non-agriculturalists as husbands for their daughters: 'when I married my daughter recently I chose a man owning a *banian* [garment] company – not one in agriculture. ... No girl wants to marry an agricultural man, because life will be hard.'

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<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Judith Heyer's work in two villages 20-30km to the northwest of Tiruppur where she found that there were a significant minority happy to remain in agriculture (2010).

One important factor explaining why people chose to work in the textile sector, rather than agriculture, is because of the better rates of pay. The table below shows approximate wage rates in both the villages, as well as in Tiruppur, to show comparisons.

*Table II - Wage rates in agriculture and textiles, 2008-9*

		Male	Female
Allapuram	Agriculture <i>coolie</i> (typical daily)	120/-	80/-
	Agriculture – peak seasonal rates	Up to 300/-	Up to 200/-
Mannapalayam	Agriculture <i>coolie</i> (typical daily)	200/-	100/-
	Agriculture – peak seasonal rates	Up to 350/-	Up to 300/-
	PWL operator (men); cone winder (women) (per shift)	170-200/-	100/-
Tiruppur	<i>Kai madi</i> (helper) (per 1 ½ shift)	120-150/-	120-150/-
	Checking (per 1 ½ shift)	120-150/-	120-150/-
	Power-table tailor (per 1 ½ shift)	180-300/-	180-300/-
	Singer tailor (per 1 ½ shift)	250-500/-	250-500/-

Table II shows, firstly, that there is a huge range in wage rates both inside and outside agriculture, making comparisons difficult. Wage rates in agriculture vary throughout the year, depending on the season, the extent of rain, whether the canal is running, and the specific agricultural task to be performed. Others have similarly noted that agricultural wage rates vary considerably within one village (Harriss-White, Janakarajan and Colatei 2004:35). Thus in Allapuram the lowest daily wage

for a female agricultural labourer is about 80/- but during the onion harvest there are possibilities of earning up to 200/-. Similarly in Mannapalayam during the tobacco harvest there are opportunities for women to earn up to 300/- in one day. But these are short-lived seasons, and available to a limited number of people (usually women) at one time. Furthermore, the seasonality of agricultural labour means that for some months of the year agricultural workers do not get work 6 days a week. Daily wages in the Tiruppur garment industry also range enormously and, as will be seen below, can be high once skills are acquired. But Tiruppur work can also be irregular, and workers may have days, or even weeks, without work. In the powerlooms, rates are lower than the higher end of garment work, but the work is more regular and reliable, and the looms usually run throughout the year for 6 days per week.

Secondly, compared to work in the textile industry, daily agricultural wage rates are low. Even taking into account the variability of wages in Tiruppur's garment sector, the rates are higher than those in agriculture in these two villages.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of the *coolie* rate for men in Mannapalayam even the lowest paid jobs in Tiruppur are better paid than agricultural *coolie* work. Mannapalayam generally has higher rates of pay for agricultural workers compared to Allapuram, and this is in part because there is non-agricultural work available in the village itself. Thus, for men in Mannapalayam the alternative to unreliable and seasonal agricultural work (at 200/- per day) is work as a PWL operator, which is right on their doorsteps. This pays 170-200/- per shift, and is fairly reliably 6 days a week throughout the year. Women can work as cone winders in the industry (again available 6 days a week, throughout the year), which pays 100/- per day - the same as agricultural *coolie* work. The people of

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<sup>10</sup> Although Heyer's study of her villages found that whereas in the past banian companies paid more than agricultural, today [June 2009] agriculture paid better. This was attributed to there being so few people available for agricultural work, and to farmers being increasingly desperate for workers (Heyer 2010: 9).

Allapuram have to commute to Tiruppur to get access to better paid jobs. For many this is highly rewarding as wages of tailors are typically about double those of agricultural *coolie* workers. Notably, however, Tiruppur wages partly seem high because Tiruppur workers tend to work long hours (a so-called 'shift and a half', or 12 hours), and when looked at on an hourly basis the rates are not so high. The need to work long hours, and to commute from Allapuram, means that Tiruppur work is particularly difficult for women with children who find it difficult to manage with their domestic responsibilities. Thus married women in Allapuram have, in many ways, the fewest alternative options for earning, and this may explain their particularly low wages in agriculture. Similarly Harriss-White has noted 'real female agricultural wages have not tightened in the way male wages have, because women are unable to commute to wage work in town. They are prevented from doing this by their prior responsibility for domestic work at home' (2003:116). In both villages, therefore, the daily rates of pay for agricultural labour for men are invariably higher than for women: men get 120 to 200/- per day in agriculture, while women get 80 to 100/-. This is particularly pronounced in Mannapalayam where men have steady and comparatively well paid powerloom work available within the village itself.

While wages in agriculture are lower than in the textile industry, there is clear evidence that agricultural wage rates have increased in recent years. Both agricultural labourers and their employers tell us that there have been significant rises in wages. A group of Mathari agricultural labourers in Allapuram explained that for 'the past 10 years we were paid 50-60/- ... only this year has it gone up to 80/-. We struggled to get that ... we were fighting with the owners and argued that the price of food has gone up. All landowners pay the same – they agree among

themselves.’ Landowners explain the wage rate increases over the past five years as being ‘because of the labour shortage’. For example, the rates for processing tobacco (a particularly dirty and smelly task) in Mannapalayam had increased significantly over the last three years, from 2/- per strip of tobacco threaded 2 years ago, to 2/50 last year, to 3/- this year. This task is highly time dependent as the tobacco leaves are left to soak in a pit, and if left too long they decay, so workers are in a strong position to negotiate a higher wage.

Thus agricultural wages have risen over time and are, on the whole, higher in this part of Tamil Nadu than in other regions. So, how do these wages rates compare to other parts of Tamil Nadu? Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj observe that basic agricultural wage rates increased to 70/- for men and 40/- for women in January 2009 in Iruvelpattu (South Arcot district, now Villupuram District), noting also that ‘wage levels in agriculture have been driven up by the general tightening of labour markets with the increased availability of non-farm employment’ (2010: 26). *Coolie* wages in villages 20-30km to the north of Tiruppur were estimated at between 70-80/- for women and 100-150/- for men (although men normally only work on better paid contract terms now – see below) (Heyer 2010a: 6-7), while in the village of Udaiyalur, Thanjavur District (where brick kiln work offered a better paid alternative) agricultural rates were 75/- for women and 100-120/- for men.<sup>11</sup> So these comparisons would suggest that wages vary geographically, depending among other things on whether there is non-agricultural work available, and that in villages very

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<sup>11</sup> This is a village in which we undertook a small household survey, as we were looking at longer distance migrants to Tiruppur. It is located 300km from Tiruppur, and many Dalit migrants come to Tiruppur to work in the garment industry. Brick kiln work pays up to 300/- for men and 120/- for women and is also seasonal.



close to Tiruppur, or those with local textile work available such as Mannapalayam, agricultural wages are generally higher.

But the general tightening of labour markets does not push wages up equally for everyone: rural labour markets are socially embedded and segmented on the basis of, amongst others, caste and gender. Harriss-White has noted that – in the absence of major state interference – labour markets are structured by social institutions, and that such social institutions, rather than losing importance over time, are in fact being ‘refashioned by market exchange, becoming more economic in their content and roles, but still shaping economic action’ (2004: 159, see also Harriss-White 2003). In the context of our villages, caste and gender continue to function as key social institutions that not only produce structural imperfections in labour markets and wage patterns, but that also shape people’s access to specific employment opportunities. Thus, women’s responsibilities in the reproductive sphere curtail their access to job opportunities outside the village, and in turn affect village-based labour supplies and wage structures. Women’s constrained mobility – especially compared to that of men – shapes both the nature and extent of labour market tightening and the reproduction of highly gendered wage structures in the village. Such structural imperfections explain why women’s wages continue to be close to half those of men’s, despite an overall upward push in wages due to the availability of new employment opportunities, and why some Dalits fail to access the urban labour market altogether. Here, the differences between our two villages become particularly pertinent. In Mannapalayam there is non-farm work available in the village itself, and women’s agricultural wages match those paid to women in the powerlooms. In Allapuram such non-farm work is only available to those able to

commute, and women's agricultural wages are lower than in Mannapalayam. Furthermore, in Mannapalayam Dalit's continued bondage to powerloom employers through debt explains their exclusion from Tiruppur garment jobs and the depressed wages in the village powerloom industry compared to those on offer in garment companies.

Wages are not the only aspect of the labour market to have changed. There have also been changes in the nature of labour arrangements (that is how labourers are hired, and under what conditions) as well as in issues related to status and dignity, and in particular in how labourers are treated by the landowners. While most agricultural labour is still organised by the direct employment of daily labourers for a fixed, daily wage ('*coolie*') an increasing number of agricultural tasks are now organised on a contractual basis ('contract'). Under this arrangement a landowner makes an agreement with a group of workers to complete a task for a set payment. Workers are paid to plant or harvest a particular field, or per basket of onions harvested, or strip of tobacco threaded. Under such piece rate arrangements workers can earn up to 300/- per day, and in some cases women who normally work as powerloom cone-winders leave that work for the period of, for example, the tobacco harvest.

Evidence from across India suggests that both group and individual piece work arrangements have increased in recent decades (Gidwani 2001; Kapadia 1995; Breman 1996; Ruthven and Kumar 2002). A huge range of contractual arrangements are found: *within* any village there may be many different arrangements, and within each arrangement there may also be great diversity in terms of terms and conditions,

affected by gender, caste and age (see Rogaly 1996). It has been noted in very different contexts that workers welcome piece rates as an opportunity to maximise earnings (Rogaly 2008: 506; Breman 1996). But there are other reasons, particularly related to supervision and broader aspects of well-being. Ruthven and Kumar found an increase in labour gangs working on a piece-rate basis in Uttar Pradesh, 'afforded a new respect to labour (freedom from supervision, more independence in conduct and a direct reward for hard work)' (2002: 14). Gidwani's study of workers in Gujarat noted that they prefer group-based piecework, which enables them to earn more, but also 'allow[s] them to conduct work at their own tempo and without constant interference and berating' (2001: 90). Breman notes that casual workers may prefer piece-work as although it leads to self-exploitation, it 'enables men and women in the prime of their working lives to free themselves of a direct tie to an employer which is felt as galling... [and] might benefit the dignity of labour' (1996: 238-9).

Our evidence supports such arguments. Contract arrangements leave workers able to make choices about how long and how hard to work. A group of women removing the leaves from harvested onions under the blistering April sun in Allapuram were paid per basket that they filled, and worked long hours throughout the harvest season. They worked longer hours than a *coolie* worker would normally work (9am to 6pm, with an hour off for lunch), and they didn't want to move the harvested onions into the shade to work on them there, as that would have taken too long. Working without the Gounder landowner alongside them they were proud of the fact that if they didn't want to work, they didn't have to, boasting 'we will take leave whenever we feel like it!' Being able to work at their own pace, take time off when they wish, and work without the supervision of Gounder landowners were all important to them.

The latter is particularly significant in the context of an agricultural system where Gounders have traditionally worked closely alongside their workers in the field (Chari 2004). Working unsupervised gives them a sense of autonomy, and ‘spares them everyday reminders of subordination that accompany supervised work’ (Gidwani 2001: 95).<sup>12</sup>

Kapadia has noted that a crucial characteristic of the increasingly common contract work she identified in eastern Tamil Nadu is that they are negotiable, but because of the large surplus of labour, ‘this negotiability is entirely to the benefit of employers’ (Kapadia 1995: 232). In the area around Tiruppur the situation today is quite different, and here it is the workers who are bargaining from a position of strength. Thus, for example, the leader of the tobacco workers mentioned above, a woman aged about 50 called Govindamma, explained that the leaders of each group of tobacco workers got together each year and agreed the price they would ask farmers. By negotiating hard they had, every year for the past three years, successfully won an increase in the rates of pay.

Working arrangements have also changed for daily labourers, and today the working hours of an agricultural *coolie* labourer are shorter than ever before. A 46 year old Mathari agricultural labourer told us that when he was aged about 15 he worked for a Gounder and ‘At that time we would work from 5 am when we had to be at the farm, until anything from 7pm to 10 pm. Now ...we work from 7am to 3 or 3.30 pm. Now we come home for lunch, but earlier we couldn’t come home for lunch, we either took

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth speculating whether the widespread use of piece rates in the Tiruppur garment industry, which is associated with masculinity (see De Neve 2010) has had some influence in the fields of the villages in the region. Tiruppur workers will often boast of how many items they managed to stitch in a day, and what their earnings will be, and this way of talking about work is certainly brought back to the village.

lunch with us or the Gounder gave us old food to eat.<sup>13</sup> The reduction in working hours has happened gradually, and today a typical working day is from 7 or 8am to 3pm (with an hour off for lunch). This reduction in working hours can be seen in large part because of the labour shortage – as one Gounder farmer explained ‘if I don’t let them leave at 3pm, then they won’t come and work for me the next day, so what choice do I have!’

In the past, working hours were very different: employed as *pannaiyal* many Matharis were at the beck and call of Gounders. The system of advances, which dates back to at least the eighteenth century, served to secure labour for land owners, and was arranged in such a way that the borrower was unable to repay the advance (Cederlöf 1997: 60.) By only employing men as *pannaiyal*, the land owner effectively had control over their wives and children as well, as the latter were employed as casual labourers and were paid cash wages, or payment in kind or a combination of the two. By the late 1960s Lindberg noted that casual labourers worked notably shorter hours than *pannaiyal*: while *pannaiyal* would begin their day early in the morning, cleaning and feeding the cattle, the daily *coolie* would ‘spend hours waiting by his house’ for the Gounder to come and get him. While Lindberg interprets this as a strategy to ensure they got reasonable pay (noting that going to the Gounder to ask for work would bring down the payment to half), it also reduced their working hours.<sup>14</sup> By the 1960s there were fewer *pannaiyal*, and the position itself had changed, to something closer to an overseer who supervised other labourers (Cederlöf 1997). While today the position of *panniayal* in this part of Tamil Nadu, and the system of advances associated with it, has largely (but not entirely, see Heyer 2000a) disappeared within

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<sup>13</sup> It is not clear whether he was working as a casual labourer or as a *pannaiyal* at this time.

<sup>14</sup> Lindberg quoted in Cederlof 1997: 151.

agriculture, forms of unfree labour (or debt bondage) have re-appeared in the powerloom sector of the textile industry.<sup>15</sup>

Associated with the reduction in working hours, is a greater sense of empowerment that Dalits have today, and in particular their ability to say no to Gounders: 'Earlier when we worked in agriculture even if we were sick, the Gounders called us for work and we had to go. Now we can say that we aren't going to work and no one can say anything.' Today landowners complain that even after making arrangements in advance, they have to go to the Dalit colony in the morning, to be sure that the worker turns up for work. That workers have a choice and *can* say no to farmers is in part because of the diversity of income sources within the household: 45% of households in Allapuram and 48% in Mannapalayam have more than one source of income within the household.

Another part of the reason why workers have the choice of saying no to Gounder landlords relates to state policies. The State government of Tamil Nadu has had strongly welfarist anti-poverty policies, focussing on reproduction (see Venkatsubramaniam 2006). The Public Distribution System (PDS) with its subsidised food and politically important 'one-rupee rice', as well as midday meals, free gas cookers and TVs, provide what Heyer calls a 'cushion for the poor', and 'may also provide incentives for people to supply less labour' (2010b: 8).

The state has also been involved in another policy that in one of our villages at least gives agricultural labourers another choice of work today: the National Rural

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<sup>15</sup> See Carswell and De Neve, (under review) 'From Field to Factory'.

Employment Guarantee scheme (NREGS). This scheme was enacted by Parliament in September 2005, and extended to across the country in April 2008. It provides for 100 days of guaranteed waged employment to rural households, at a minimum wage of 80/- per day (100/- per day from January 2010). Harriss has noted that 'early studies of the implementation of the NREGA show up the considerable difficulties of implementation, but also that it has led to increased popular awareness of rights' (2009: 13; see also Ramachandran and Rawal 2010). Marius-Gnanou's research in Villupuram, eastern Tamil Nadu in 2007-8, suggested that guaranteed employment through NREGA had 'impacted the poorest among the poor, mostly women who cannot migrate for many reasons (young children, aged, single woman...)' (2008: 139) Findings from the NREGA Survey 2008 suggest that 'Slowly but surely, the Act is making a difference to the lives of the rural poor,' (Dreze and Khera 2009).<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, in Mannapalayam a group of NREGA workers could be found most days, clearing the tank, and digging ditches along the sides of roads. Predominantly (but not entirely) made up of women, these workers explained the reasons why they chose this work, over other work. For them the location of the NREGA work, its flexibility and working hours meant that it could easily be combined with childcare and household responsibilities. Out of a team of 15, 14 were women – and none of them had any involvement in the powerloom industry. One noted that in the past she had worked as a cone-winder, but due to her son's ill-health she needed to be able to leave work at short notice, and this was not possible in the powerlooms. Compared to powerloom work, which requires commitment to turn up for work everyday, NREGA work is entirely flexible and people can decide each day whether

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<sup>16</sup> See also *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, 19 2008

to work. This means it can easily be combined with agricultural labour work so, during quiet times in the agricultural cycle, NREGA is ideal for many. Another benefit of NREGA was the location of the work. During the months that we were there, all NREGA work was located close to people's houses which meant it was easy for women to combine it with household responsibilities, and it was also possible for young children to be brought with the workers (see also Khera and Nayak 2009). Finally, the day is relatively short, finishing at about 2:30.

For Gounder landowners and powerloom owners NREGA is yet another government policy that stops people working hard, and this, along with one-rupee rice, they claim, only contributes to the 'labour problem.' As one Gounder explained: 'People prefer to lead a jolly life – the government gives one rupee rice and they can just fill their stomachs, and there is no need to work hard.' Another way of putting it could be that these government policies give greater choices to Dalits: they can withdraw their labour from Gounders' fields and powerloom units, they can work for NREGA, or indeed they can work less overall. Furthermore, the recent decision to push the NREGA wage up to 100/- per day has put further upward pressure on agricultural wages (Heyer 2010b).

With opportunities to work in Tiruppur, and for some the availability of NREGA work, Dalits are no longer solely dependent on Gounders for unreliable and poorly paid agricultural work. While dependency on Gounders has reduced there has also been a shift in the way that Dalits are treated by Gounders, something that is often mentioned by them. There are many stories of past oppression of Dalits by Gounders: of Dalits having to get off a bicycle if they saw a Gounder approaching, of



being beaten by Gounders for perceived disrespectful behaviour, of having to put their lungi down, of not being allowed to take tea in the tea stall, of being given coconut shells instead of tumblers to drink from, of Gounders putting cow dung in the water on their farms, to stop Dalits drinking it, and so on. Cederlöf details accounts of Gounder hostility to missionary activities in the area being directed at Dalits: they were forbidden from attending religious functions organised by the missionaries, and if they did they were refused work. The threat of being denied access to work as well as to water was extremely effective in bringing the Dalits round to the Gounder way of thinking (Cederlöf 1997).

Things have undoubtedly changed, and as a group of Dalit workers in Mannapalayam explained: 'Earlier we were very much frightened by Gounders and they terrified us. But now they don't terrify us and we aren't frightened of them.' As part of this shift landowners treat their workers differently: they give them tea, and address them in much more respectful ways than ever before.<sup>17</sup> One landowner in Mannapalayam, for example, laughed as he told me how he hired women to harvest and process his tobacco. 'I have to treat them as a bride! I give them tea and snacks in the morning, a very good lunch, and tea in the evening!' Another landowner said: 'I give coffee and am so kind. Earlier it was different. Now we give coffee, we use kind words – *papa* [little one], *kannae* [you're my eyes – an affectionate word used for children], *ponnae* [little girl – another affectionate word] - earlier we'd say *indaa* [a very disrespectful way of calling someone]'. Terms of address are often mentioned: being referred to by their name, and not their caste name, and no longer being referred to with the grammatical form usually reserved for children and dogs is

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to imply that changing labour markets are the only reason for the changes. There are many other contributing factors (education, politics etc) which are not considered here.

symbolic of the shift that has occurred (see also Cederlöf 1997: 217). This is not, however, to suggest that Dalits are no longer discriminated against, as there is evidence that Dalits still face prejudice in many aspects of their life and work. Thus, for example, in Mannapalayam Dalits are not able to sit in the inner part of one of the village tea-shops and they cannot enter the village temple<sup>18</sup> Nor are Dalits treated as anything like equals by Gounders – indeed some of the terms of address mentioned by the Gounder landlord above while polite (if not intimate terms), could still be seen as patronising if not infantilising: *ponnae*, *papa*.

Such non-material aspects of life have been shown to be extremely important for migrant workers elsewhere. Gidwani's study of *Kolis* of central Gujarat, who migrate daily to work in factories, found that while the expected returns of factory and agricultural work were about equal (taking into account both monetary and non-monetary returns), uncertain factory work was attractive as workers were 'tired of being goaded by Patel farm employers'... and factory work was seen as being more "prestigious" than farm work (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003: 194-5). Breman similarly found that young Dalit migrants from Gujarat 'enjoyed a freedom denied to them when working in the fields'. They might be treated as commodities in the urban casual labour markets, but they are motivated by 'the anonymity which accompanies them in the outside world [as] they are not immediately identified and stigmatized' as low caste (Breman 1996: 238). Writing of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, Still observes the link between the reduced dependence of Dalits on upper castes and a growing confidence amongst them (2009). Rogaly and Coppard have noted that migration offered 'greater potential for independence and self-worth... the very act of *moving*

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<sup>18</sup> See Carswell and De Neve, T-shirts and Tumblers. See also Still (2009).

away to work and earn gave rise to the qualitative change in relations' between the rajas and the service castes (2003: 411 *ital in original*). Those who work in town, as Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan found, 'repudiat[e] place-specific social hierarchies through "aesthetic transgressions" that recast bodies and therefore the body politic' (2003: 199). These transgressions include new ways of dressing, speaking, as well as diets and consumption habits, and these indicate to the local landowners that 'the traditional social order is under siege' (2003: 199). Anandhi has similarly noted elsewhere in Tamil Nadu that Dalit youth 'separate themselves from the past dalit subordination ... by consciously recasting their appearance', particularly through dress. 'Redefining their masculine identity through consumption' they are 'unsettling' caste distinctions encoded through appearance (2002: 4402). Likewise, in our villages, Dalit commuters increasingly wear ready-made 'pants', t-shirts and sports shoes, while Tiruppur incomes are spent on mobile phones, motor-bikes and improving housing. These forms of consumption indicate to everyone that they are part of an urban culture, and they are bringing this *nagaarikam*, or urban sophistication, back to the village.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has focussed on changing rural livelihoods in a highly industrialised region at the tail end of a global production network. Exploring how livelihoods have changed the paper has shown how the growth in non-agricultural activities has affected wages in agriculture, the nature of rural labour arrangements, and broader aspects of livelihoods that are so important to labourers. The development of the textile industry and the increased availability of non-agricultural jobs, has had a profound effect of the livelihoods of those people living in the region – *even those*

*who are not directly employed in the industry.* The very existence of the industry gives people choices. Commuters from Allapuram to the Tiruppur garment cluster should be seen as mobile workers who move across space, and even though this mobility is only on a small scale it is critical. It is this mobility that allows the ‘politics of labour to transcend local power geometries’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 9. See also Rogaly 2009). It enables Dalit commuters to escape the social inequities that are associated with being tied to capital in the village (in the form of the village landowners), and move to the town – where they might still be tied to capital, but it has fewer of the historically entrenched social inequalities associated with it. The same cannot be said for the powerloom workers of Mannapalayam, who remain working for the same Gounders in the powerloom units. Here Dalits are still closely tied to Gounders through the debts of the powerloom industry, and – within the powerloom units – discrimination continues through, for example, the two-tumbler policy.<sup>19</sup> While the agricultural workers who stay behind are not themselves mobile, that so many Dalits now work outside agriculture has had a positive knock-on effect as it enhances the bargaining position of those that remain, enabling them to make small but significant changes to their working conditions and pay. By refusing to return to work the next day if hours are not reduced, taking a decent lunch break, and demanding better pay workers have asserted their agency, and in doing so have ‘reworked’ (Katz 2004) their situation, resulting in better working conditions. The changes are far-reaching. Yes, it is the commuters who have changed how they dress etc (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003) but even agricultural workers benefit from the improvements in the way they are addressed and treated more

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<sup>19</sup> See Carswell and De Neve, (under review) ‘From Field to Factory’

generally as there has been a spill-over transformative impact on agricultural workers in the area.

As other opportunities have become available to workers who previously had few choices outside agricultural *coolie* work, so their position vis-à-vis landowners has shifted and their bargaining position has improved. Agricultural *coolie* work is still very important to the livelihoods of Matharis in both villages, but workers' agricultural wages – particularly of men – have increased, and workers have demanded – and obtained – shorter working hours. But, perhaps more important, they are no longer at the behest of landowners. The labour shortage has contributed to changes in the way that landowners treat their agricultural workers: the use of insulting names has declined dramatically, and landowners now give their workers much more respect, giving them, for example, tea breaks. Labourers now feel free to work for a particular landowner, or – if it suits them – to not work for him. And the ability to say no to a Gounder, in part because of the diversity of livelihood opportunities available to them, has made a big impact on their wellbeing. As a Dalit woman told me very explicitly: 'Earlier people suffered a lot. They could only go to agricultural work and now they have much more freedom to select work – they can go to powerlooms, to Tiruppur, any work that they prefer.' While Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan note that migration to urban jobs may 'allow agents to loosen – and occasionally repudiate – institutionalized forms of authority and control that are exercised through the rural labor process' (2003: 193), this paper takes this further by noting the transformative knock-on effects on those that remain behind. The existence of a nearby industrial cluster opens up strategies for agricultural workers to resist and rework the rural based social relations in which their labour was trapped.

Thus the paper has shown that while there is a need to embed labour agency in GPNs (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010), we need to go further. Labourers' agency needs to be understood within the context of their livelihoods and changes to these livelihoods, which are deeply embedded within wider social relations and processes. The full potential and impact of labour's agency can only be grasped by a wide and inclusive approach – one that incorporates workers' wider livelihood strategies as well as people's values such as those of dignity and independence.

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