

Dear Readers,

Thanks for reading this draft which I hope to resubmit to the journal *Comparative Studies in Society in History*. This paper is long, and I need your help in hacking it down, because I can just point to the book for various things that lead the reader astray here.

1. One place might be in the introductory remarks about subaltern studies and my position on it. Is this interesting to you as a reader or does it seem too belabored and do your eyes glaze over?
2. Another place I could cut substantially is in the section on “using agrarian memory”, where I try to use insights from linguistic anthropology on the multi-functionality of signs. I want to show that this is not just an argument about what economists call “path dependence” (*that* the regional past makes the present), because the past can be used in multiple ways, and the how question is more interesting. Linguistic anthropology has let me think a bit more carefully about how “interpellation” works; that is, how shared structural and historical baggage is invoked and harnessed (articulation in both senses of linking and voicing) in everyday acts. Indexical signs are very interesting from this perspective, and they breathe new life into how structures work through practice, in my view. Is this persuasive or should I cut this out for the purposes of a paper?
3. Does the conclusion work? It jumps ahead to the export phase, but it is an engaging story that speaks to the persistence of toil..

Thanks,  
Sharad

**Capital as Toil: Peasant-Workers and the Agrarian Past in a South Indian  
Industrial Town**

Sharad Chari  
Lecturer in Geography, London School of Economics,  
Senior Researcher, School of Development Studies, University of Natal-Durban.

charis@nu.ac.za

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### *Abstract*

Tiruppur town, in Tamilnadu state, was propelled to the center of India's cotton knitted garment exports through in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is key about industry in Tiruppur is that work has been organized through networks of small firms integrated through intricate subcontracting arrangements controlled by local capital of the Gounder caste, from modest agrarian and working-class origins. In effect the whole town works like a decentralized factory for the global economy, with local capital of peasant-worker origins at the helm. What is more, these "self-made men" hinge their narratives of industry and class mobility on their *ulaippu* or propensity to "toil". This paper explains how Gounder peasant-workers remade the dynamics of work by drawing on a singular agrarian past remembered through the sign of Gounder toil and enacted in the industrial labor process. Tiruppur offers a set of insights on how gendered, agrarian work practices and social relations are renovated in making a hallmark of late 20<sup>th</sup> century global capitalism, the resurgent industrial cluster. What is more, Gounder subaltern capitalists demonstrate how specific histories of gender and work might be revived in practice to remake relations of class and place in such a way that a highly productive rhetoric of liberal opportunity might make toiling capitalists of some, and more insecure workers of most.

During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tiruppur town in Tamilnadu state became India's centerpiece in the export of cotton knitted garments. Between 1986 and 1997, Tiruppur's export earnings skyrocketed from \$25 million to \$636 million, the number of garments exported increased more than nine-fold, and Tiruppur shifted from basic T-shirts to diversified multi-product exports of fashion garments. This industrial boom has been organized through networks of small firms integrated through intricate subcontracting arrangements controlled by local capital of the Gounder caste from modest agrarian and working-class origins. In effect the whole town works like a decentralized factory for the global economy, but with local capital of peasant-worker origins at the helm. What is more, these self-made men hinge their retrospective narratives of class mobility and industrial success on their propensity to toil: the word *ulaippu* is distinct from the conventional word for work. How did Gounder peasant-workers remake the dynamics of work through their toil, to make Tiruppur a powerhouse of global production?

This paper emerges from a larger exploration of the regional geographies, cultural histories and work practices that have enabled certain subaltern men to accumulate capital in provincial India.

Against dominant renditions of Tiruppur as an industrial district on the model of the much vaunted 'Third Italy', or of Tiruppur as a success story of unleashed entrepreneurial energies and decentralization in a time of unprecedented economic liberalization and globalization of capital, I argue that work in Tiruppur is forged through a geographically-rooted configuration of power, meaning, memory and practice. In this paper, I concentrate on a central aspect of this configuration which has to do with the agrarian question and its relevance for industry in Tiruppur. First, I situate Tiruppur's toiling Gounders in the regional agrarian question in two ways. I argue that Gounder toil derives from a specific agrarian labor regime forged in the 1930s. I also contextualize the making of Tiruppur as a specialist town in regional processes of agrarian transition and geographical specialization. Second, I turn to the ways in which Gounder peasant-workers came to the industrial cluster in Tiruppur and remade practices of work while remaking themselves as a fraternity of decentralized capital. I conclude with the ways in which ex-worker Gounder owners enact their propensities to toil in stitching sections at the heart of the division of labor, where they revive elements of their agrarian past to remake the industrial present. Through the *use* of the agrarian past in the industrial labor process, Gounder subaltern capitalists forge a form of fraternal hegemony that works through networks of small firms that makes an entire town work for the global economy. In posing the oxymoron subaltern capital, I do not suggest growth with relative equity, as a liberal economist might put it, but insist on the relations between capitalist accumulation and culturally specific practices of gender and caste exclusion. In other words, I am not arguing *that* the subaltern can accumulate capital, but that it is important to understand *how* certain subalterns can remake self and circumstance to harness specific historical resources to the possibilities of capitalist development. Subaltern knowledge, in other words, becomes a means for forging the uneven development of capitalism.

Invoking the notion of subalternity requires that I situate this research in relation to the highly influential Subaltern Studies Collective and, more generally, to postcolonial

studies' departure from the traditional concerns of agrarian political economy. What has become clear, if Chakrabarty's (2000) genealogy of Subaltern Studies can be used as a window into debates over Indian pasts, is that the divergence between Marxists and postcolonial scholars may in fact be dramatized by polemical rather than intellectual or political commitments. Marxist polemical broadsides against postmodernists who valorize the singular fragment parallel postmodernist broadsides against Marxist who adhere to vulgar class reductionism. While Chakrabarty is right to argue that one cannot seek fruitful synthesis in metropolitan Marxism, this does not hold for traditions of Marxism that do not carry metropolitan presumptions of liberal subjectivity and class reductionism. Neither do these latter traditions assume that the singular and fragmentary are necessarily sites of resistance to global capitalism. Gounder self made men demonstrate how certain subalterns might use singular constructions of inequality and difference to work the system, to accumulate capital and dominate an increasingly fragmented working class.

Scholars in the agrarian tradition of Marxist political economy, in particular, have for the past several decades developed anti-essentialist understandings of capitalist change that explore creative uses of the past in ways that may nonetheless be deeply exclusionary.<sup>i</sup> My contention is that these sorts of investigations have been partially foreclosed by intellectual shifts between the peasant studies of the 1970s and the emergent postcolonial studies of the 1980s. Ann Stoler's (1995) retrospective positioning of her research at precisely this moment captures, in my view, a tension between a flowering of debate and revision *within* agrarian studies, on the one hand, and a departure *from* the central concerns of Marxism to focus on colonial power/knowledge on the other hand. It is the passage of concern between these two hands, rather than the creative tension between them that has characterized intellectual shifts, and my central concern in this paper is with roads not taken. If the earlier form of agrarian studies was obsessed with what constituted peasants and proletarians, and how peasant institutions functioned, postcolonial studies drew attention to the cartography of knowledge and power, and broader understanding of 'ideology' that could attend to movements of affect and comportment through which hegemony is differentially lived. Functionalism has no analytical purchase on the what Stoler calls the vulnerable 'underside of hegemony', of the unstable ways in which elements of the past are used to articulate, in the dual sense of joining and voicing, contradictory capitalist geographies. In using Stoler's prescient retrospective essay, I argue that is imperative for scholarship to return to the older set of agrarian questions concerning the dynamics of agrarian institutions in perpetuating marginality, but through an attention to the vulnerabilities of capitalist hegemony as configured by situated knowledges and forms of comportment. Through the strange careers of Tiruppur's fraternal capital, I ask both how Gounders articulate their agrarian past to remake the industrial present in their renderings of capital as toil.

### **Agrarian Transition and Industrialization in Coimbatore District**

Why do Tiruppur's self-made Gounder men pause predictably to hinge their retrospective narratives of success on their toil and what does this have to do with remaking place,

class and industrial work? In situating these narratives of work on a broader canvas, I focus on two linked agrarian questions that have fundamentally shaped dispersed ‘specialist towns’ centered on producing specific commodities. First, Gounder farmers forged a particular production politics in the ‘flexible’ Gounder *tóttam* or garden farm of early commercial agriculture in the 1930s in the area of Coimbatore District, where Tiruppur lies. These ways of working and controlling work provided resources that Gounders could draw on in very different contexts. Second, agricultural specialization and regional agro-industrial linkages in Coimbatore District produced a series of specialist towns with Tiruppur at the helm, in a regional mosaic of rural-urban development that set off Coimbatore from the rest of South India. These two aspects of the regional agrarian question—centered on ‘flexibility’ and ‘specialization,’ in contemporary terms—also emerged within a distinct political climate. Coimbatore has, until recently, been a stronghold of Congress and Communist activism in contrast to the anti-Brahminism and Tamil linguistic nationalism that swept the rest of Tamilnad, as well as the radical grassroots communism that grew in the neighboring state of Kerala.<sup>ii</sup> In contrast to these neighboring regions, politics in Coimbatore has not taken radical anti-caste, communist or nationalist-populist turns as surrounding districts have at various times. Instead, this region of relative political quiescence has seen the emergence of a number of specialist towns with local capital at the helm. The most dramatic form of local hegemony and sustained accumulation has been in Tiruppur knitwear, through a particular confluence of social relations and agrarian legacies.

### **Production Politics in 1930s Gounder farming**

“If the Coimbatore ryot is compared with the peasant proprietors of Europe, he undoubtedly suffers by the comparison. In mere agriculture he is behind them, not so much in empirical knowledge as in energy of practice...[T]he minute and patient industry with which the French ryots [sic] cultivate...find[s] little parallel amongst the Coimbatore ryots, and a striking feature of the Coimbatore rural economy is the want of energy and thrift in dealing with space and time... What then can be expected for the Coimbatore peasant proprietor not many years emancipated from the rigours of tyranny, from barbarous invasions, and from a tyrannous fiscal system.” F. A. Nicholson.<sup>iii</sup>

In writing the most important ethnographic source on fin-de-siècle Coimbatore in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, both for history and colonial rule, Frederick Nicholson was profoundly ambivalent about the industry of Coimbatore’s ryots. While bemoaning their contrast with “French ryots”, Nicholson also notes peasant proprietors investing in wells and helping other laborers access land to become owner-cultivators in their own right. This colonial order of things presumes that Pax Britannica has allowed both Tamil and French ryots to occupy the same spectrum of possibility, in which tyranny can give way to industry. What is remarkable is that by the 1930s and 1940s, Gounder peasant proprietors became known as a caste whose virtues were precisely in thrift and industry. Nicholson’s normative position, that Gounders might rather emulate French “ryots”

rational use of space and time, seems to have been borne out in practice. What explains this progressive *caste* whose conduct supports the currents of colonial capitalism?

Indeed, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, several pre-colonial geographies in the Madras Presidency had become parts of a colonial periphery while retaining distinct regional trajectories. By the Great Depression, these peripheries could then be seen by historians and political economists as reeling from shared effects of a global economy. In the process of making this differentiated colonial periphery, ethnographic expertise like Nicholson's brought modernization theory into historical consciousness. While colonial experts marked Indians as different, increasingly through the ideology of caste, this historiography also marked in normative gestures how Indians should rather be. In this framework, Gounder peasants in the frontier country of Coimbatore were primed to be a progressive caste precisely as Madras was becoming part of a global economy. My argument, elaborated more in Chari (2004, Chapter 4) is that this progressive caste did not emerge fully formed from the head of colonial experts, but was forged in changing practices in the fields of rural Coimbatore. In the construction of colonial hegemony, the colonial state and its successor have been relatively weak in shaping rural Coimbatore, leaving considerable room for non-state forms of power and knowledge to thrive well into the era of postcolonial neoliberalism.<sup>iv</sup>

The new popular prejudice of the industrious Gounder farmer was forged in the fields of western Tamilnadu in a particular production politics emerging in the early years of commercial agriculture in South India. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, regional agriculture was mainly of food crops destined for local markets, but by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Coimbatore had become a bastion of commercial agriculture in the south. What is more, Coimbatore's agrarian structure in 1931 was dominated by cultivating owners (40.9%) and agricultural laborers (49.3%), with relatively small classes of cultivating tenants (7.6%) and non-cultivating proprietors (1.9%).<sup>v</sup> The region's characteristic farming system was formed in part by the environment, marked by sparse rainfall and heavy black soils which required more labor than the dry plains to the east and north-east of the Tamil country. Irrigated farming required wells cut through the hard gneissic rock to the deep water table below. Well irrigation, in turn, required masonry and draught power, and well-irrigated *tóttams* or gardens sought to recover these investments through year-round farming.<sup>vi</sup> A form of intensive smallholder farming took root in Coimbatore as new black soil was brought under the plough in the 1920s.

The commercialization of land was also well underway by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The scarcity of labor and the persistence of a land frontier prompted Frederick Nicholson to note the ease with which laborers could access land and become owner-cultivators in their own right. Struggles over land pepper records of criminality, and the deepening of the land market by the 1930s parallels rural Coimbatore's notoriety for its violent entrepreneurs.<sup>vii</sup> By the 1940s, there were more land sales and the price of land was higher in Coimbatore than in other parts of Madras Presidency, including the rich paddy-growing banks of the Cauvery River. A 1946 tenancy survey shows the highest rental values of well-irrigated land in Coimbatore. Money and land markets were tightly connected, as defaults on loans were often the impetus to land transfers, so much so that a

Coimbatore banker claimed that entire village lands changed hands every 40 to 50 years. Along with active land markets, Coimbatore saw the early development of tenancy markets with varying degrees of lessor involvement in the rented farm. Often, the lessor would choose the spread of crops, provide manure to the tenant and allow the latter to keep foodgrains while relinquishing the marketing of cotton. As a measure of their commitment to the market, farmers would often exchange plots of land to consolidate their holdings around the most rational use of water.<sup>viii</sup>

Gounder farming changed qualitatively with the arrival of the American strain of long-staple 'Cambodia' cotton, introduced in Madras in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the mills of Coimbatore and Bombay. As early as 1909, a key institution for crop research and development, the Agricultural University, moved to Coimbatore and became a center for research on varieties of cotton. Areas of Coimbatore subsequently went through a dramatic shift from coarse cereals to Cambodia cotton, and this shift in cropping patterns was most pronounced in Palladam Taluk, in which Tiruppur lay. While Gounder *tóttams* also grew tobacco and groundnut with success, irrigated Cambodia led the expansion of cash cropping in the 1920s. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, Coimbatore increased production of cotton in relation to all cash crops faster than other districts in the south. The region's farmers also intensified *tóttam* farming rather than cutting costs and wages.<sup>ix</sup>

What was key about Gounder *tóttams* was that they were highly flexible in relation to changing agricultural markets. In part, this flexibility had to do with secure and perennial access to groundwater. During the two 1910s and 1920s, farmers in Tiruppur and nearby Dharapuram Taluks lead the district in using state loans for sinking new wells, and in Avinashi and Tiruppur Taluks for repairing existing wells. The Government Department of Industries claimed to have played a key role in boring existing wells, particularly in the late 1920s.<sup>x</sup> Another aspect of the flexibility of Gounder farms had to do with their ability to spread risks borne of market and nature by simultaneously growing a variety of crops, shifting emphasis as needed. As the price of cattle increased costs of ploughing as well as of draught-powered *kavalai* irrigation, farmers either shifted to hiring-in professional ploughing teams or to commanding more fodder crops either by growing them or by leasing land for straw. The *tóttam* as a unit of agriculture allowed Gounder farmers to develop a reputation as 'risk-takers.' Baker's now canonical history of agrarian south India also argues that the flexibility of the Gounder *tóttam* relied on a particular set of labor arrangements that, unlike other parts of Tamilnad, neither revived forms of forced labor or debt bondage nor fully proletarianized agricultural workers. Instead, *pannaiyals* or attached 'permanent farm servants' were treated as an extension of the family, often housed and fed with the cultivator's family. Baker's rendition of agrarian relations centered on "reasonably well-paid and apparently reasonably well-satisfied labor force" has become staple in all writing on western Tamilnadu.<sup>xi</sup>

The village studies from the 1930s that provide the ethnographic basis for many of Baker's claims, particularly on familial labor relations in Gounder farms, however, reveal a more caste and gender differentiated reality to production politics.<sup>xii</sup> First, it appears that Gounder farmers in fact used a range of labor arrangements including unpaid family labor, hired Gounder families who lived with the household, indentured Dalit (Madari, in



their terms) male labor paid in kind and temporary female labor paid in cash. Labor arrangements were extremely differentiated by caste and gender; they carried varied rights, obligations and forms of payment. Only with the expansion of rural electrification did electric pumps transform rural social relations in the 1940s, by which time Coimbatore district had more than any other district in the Presidency, at 1763 pumpsets in 1944.<sup>xiii</sup> In the 1930s, Madaris, who were restricted to handling carcasses and leather, were indispensable for stitching the *pari* or leather water bags for *kavalai* irrigation. In effect, the formal subsumption of Madari family labor through ritual and economic relations was central to agricultural expansion without significant mechanization.<sup>xiv</sup> Baker's notion of familial permanent labor corresponds best to Gounder men in annual work contracts while the bulk of *pannaiyals* were Madaris tied through debt and custom:

“The most fortunate type of farm servant is the one whose caste position approximates that of his master and who ‘lives in.’ Such a man is often treated as one of the family and shares their fortunes in good and bad times. On the other hand, a large number, especially of the lower castes, are frequently very badly off. They are given an advance on some special occasion such as a wedding and nominally the loan is to be repaid in service. If the workman is invaluable the master takes care that this loan shall not be worked off and this man is attached compulsorily to the master for life, and sometimes also his sons inherit the debt after his father's death.”<sup>xv</sup>

Moreover, official sources only registered men as ‘permanent servants,’ while wives and children who were also beholden to work for the landholder were recorded as ‘casual labor.’ Families of tied *pannaiyals* provided a captive sphere of casual labor for Gounder farmers. These familial workers neither had the security of contractual relations nor customary rights. Between ‘customary’ and ‘free’ labor, in effect a feminized reserve army of labor was being made *alongside* the selective proletarianization of labor. What was most important was that the Gounder farmer was not an overseer; he worked alongside his differentiated workforce while appropriating the fruit of their shared work. This was a production politics that used caste and gender difference as well as participant supervision to subordinate working class families to the farmer who tilled alongside them. These practices of work control, I argue, provided fertile ground for an exclusionary notion of Gounder toil to recall.

The intensification of farming through permanent labor seems not to have taken place under the auspices of large farmers, but rather, as land records from 1912 indicate, through middle peasants with an average of about 20 acres. 39% of deed-holders were such middle peasants holding 64% of the land, while 60% of deed-holders were small peasants holding on average 5 acres, or 25% of the land. This differentiated agrarian structure favored smallholders, but class differentiation only deepened further through processes of indebtedness following the Depression.<sup>xvi</sup> Another important point about agrarian relations in this period is the phenomenon of ‘working partners’ in tenancy contracts. There were three types of tenancy relations: (i) fixed rents in money or cotton, with the tenant meeting all cultivation costs; (ii) the tenant as the landowner's *working partner* sharing labor, expenses and produce equally after a fixed deduction of land rent;

(iii) or the landowner contributing half the bullocks with produce divided in proportion to the landowner's contribution after a fixed deduction for land rent. These tenancy contracts demonstrate a spectrum of relations between land and labor markets, with the ideal tenant as 'working partner' combining both. Despite the decline in tenancy relations in the countryside, the notion of working partners echoes partnerships between labor and capital in Tiruppur knitwear which allow toiling Gounders to access capital while working in firms for a profit share.<sup>xvii</sup>

Turning to the spatial separation of work and home in Gounder farming, what is curious is that there was no attempt to consolidate fragmented agricultural holdings. Instead, one notes a curious phenomenon in the 1930s of each *tóttam* farm containing a "dwelling in which the farmer or a permanent laborer lives."<sup>xviii</sup> Gounder farmers stayed out in the fields during the cotton season, when "the cultivator and permanent coolies watch the crop during the night [in] turns."<sup>xix</sup> This need to be close to the place of production rings very familiar to the Gounder industrialist in Tiruppur today, who keeps a furnished room or suite so that he can sleep in the factory during the export season. A final key aspect of Gounder farming rests on the crucial role of the *Goundachi amma*, the mother of the Gounder household who engaged not only in unwaged reproductive work but also in marketing household products. Gopalaratnam implies that the *Goundachi amma* held the purse-strings of rural Gounder households, a claim that recurs in my interviews with Gounder men who insisted that they accessed family savings through their mothers.<sup>xx</sup>

I have sought to argue that several emergent characteristics of 1930s production politics that could become elements of a usable past. The key element in agrarian work politics was the Gounder farmer's participant supervisory skill in controlling differentiated labor arrangements. By exploiting workers through familial idioms in the case of fellow Gounder men, through customary caste rights backed by indenture and ritual power in the case of Madaris, and through casualized and insecure spot-market relations in the case of women. Gender and caste-differentiated labor arrangements and the possibility of class mobility for Gounder male permanent workers may have attenuated conflict in agrarian labor relations, lending to the scarcity of agrarian labor unrest in histories of Coimbatore.

### **Regional Agrarian Transition and Industrialization**

A second crucial aspect of the agrarian question concerns the ways in which specialization in Coimbatore's agrarian capitalism produced a set of intersectoral linkages across agriculture, trade and manufacturing that created conditions for the emergence of specialist towns, of which Tiruppur is but the most dramatic case. Industrial development in the region, built on the base of agricultural commercialization and specialized linkages, fed a pattern of urban development that Rukmini (1993), drawing on Bairoch (1988), calls a "thickening of the countryside" rather than through the transformation of established towns.<sup>xxi</sup> The underlying mechanism was a process of capitalist industrialization that took root in the countryside in order to access natural resources and cheap labor, but which then built on activities along agro-industrial commodity chains to forge new spaces of urban manufacture. However, agrarian

families expanded their reach into other realms of economic activity without leaving agriculture until they were pushed to do so through agrarian distress. When they did, these agrarian families followed the contours of geographical specialization in the regions specialist towns, with Gounder peasants at the helm.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tiruppur had emerged as an important railway station on the main line across the width of Madras Presidency, connecting Madras to industrial Coimbatore city and to the plantations of the Nilgiri Hills. Along with the intensification of cotton farming, Tiruppur became an entrepôt in the cotton trade, opening up opportunities for a variety of processing activities. The spread of Cambodia cotton was initially pushed by large textile and cotton interests in Coimbatore District, but production finance for cotton farming came not from urban merchants but from a range of village moneylenders, landlords, rich peasants and grocers, so that cotton remained outside the direct control of mercantile interests in contrast to the groundnut market.<sup>xxii</sup> This is why the thriving commercial economy of agrarian Coimbatore was so different from the dry plains of Arcot, for instance, where merchants' capital dominated the regional economy. Cotton trading could remain the province of farm households, with Gounder women managing the marketing of raw cotton at *cantais* (Anglicized as 'shandies' or periodic markets) with their own production finance.<sup>xxiii</sup> Gounder farmers were loath to entrust cotton marketing to merchants because the cotton market was highly speculative, and profits were made on the timing of cotton sales. Tiruppur emerged as the key south Indian cotton market, in which most of the cotton was brought to market by cultivators themselves.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The growth of Tiruppur's cotton market in the 1920s spawned institutions and agents to mediate market relations. Commission agents monitored market fluctuations and secured the appropriate time of sale through ties with particular farmers. Ginners converted raw cotton for a commission. In both cases, Gounder farmers retained control over the lint until final sale in Tiruppur. The baroque structure of credit and commodity markets swirling around the cotton commodity chain was swiftly rationalized through the effects of the Great Depression. The liberal credit of the late 1920s washed up by the late 1930s; bazaar banks and creditors closed shop, Bombay merchants picked up and left, and in their stead small group of mercantile interests bought most of the cotton and, in the absence of the range of creditors, credit was entirely in the hands of joint-stock banks. In post-Depression Madras Presidency, the center of gravity of circuits of capital shifted more strongly to the cities, to urban finance and speculation and to industry. The Depression was a watershed in urbanization both in the pull of industrial, commercial and urban growth as in the push of rural distress and entitlement failure among the rural poor. The state's failure to support rural livelihoods left many in the countryside pauperized and vulnerable to catastrophes, and entitlement failure among the rural poor compelled distress migration to towns. Farmers who rode out the depression used opportunities to invest idle capital not only in mills but also in cotton ginning, trading and finance. By the late 1940s, cultivators sold as much as half of their cotton directly in the market, and Gounder cultivators, ginners and their cooperatives sold directly to textile mills. Despite the emergence of other market towns dealing in cotton, Tiruppur remained preeminent in south India, and Gounder farmers were key in keeping it so.<sup>xxv</sup>

When agricultural commodity and credit markets collapsed during the Depression, Tiruppur grew spectacularly, at rates of 117%, much faster than other regional towns or Coimbatore city. Rural distress and incipient urban industry helped make Tiruppur the fastest growing town in the Madras Presidency. By mid-century, Tiruppur began shifting from a cotton entrepôt to a bustling manufacturing town with abundant supplies of cheap labor. To explain the emergence of specialist towns like Tiruppur, Rukmini (1993) analyzes how twin processes of regional specialization and crop concentration shaped the agrarian transition in Coimbatore. Udumalpettai and Palladam Taluks, the latter containing Tiruppur, specialized in cotton, while Pollachi Taluk specialized in groundnuts. Agricultural specialization in combination with existing transportation and communications routes helped shape economic development through marketing and processing along the agro-commodity chain. Another key to dispersed rural urbanization lay in the ways in which regional industrialization was a diversified and interlinked process. Coimbatore District experienced sustained urban growth from 1920 to 1970 in a process of intensification across several towns along with extensive urbanization and ancillarization from the main centers. The crucial period connecting processes of agrarian and industrial change was in the 1920s and 1930s, the same period in which I have argued that a new production politics was forged in Gounder farms. The missing ingredient in the analysis of Tiruppur's phenomenal urban growth is precisely *how* the internal changes in Gounder agriculture created conditions for the progressive Gounder peasant to make intersectoral linkages work.<sup>xxvi</sup>

I have sought to make two arguments about the agrarian question in Coimbatore District. First, a new production politics forged in Gounder farms in the 1930s hinged crucially on the Gounder farmer's participant supervision and control of caste and gender-differentiated labor arrangements. The 'flexible' Gounder *tóttam* rested on this production politics, in interaction with specific features of the regional farming system that could be recalled through the metonym of Gounder toil. Secondly, regional agricultural specialization and intersectoral linkages prompted by a diversifying peasantry created the conditions for dispersed, commodity-specific towns. The agrarian questions concerning production politics and agrarian transition would come together in a particular landscape of agro-industrial flexible specialization across town and country, to allow Gounder 'self made men' to remake place and class in Tiruppur, to turn their toil into capital.

### **The Careers of 'Toiling' Gounders: From Peasant-Workers to Small Owners**

"They are never afraid of working...All Gounders are very industrious people."<sup>xxvii</sup>

"Most owners here aren't big owners. Most still go to work in their companies. If you tried to find rich owners you would find a majority in banian companies. A banian company cannot run if labor and owner are on opposite sides, and if they don't respect each other. Both have to work together in order for a company to

grow. These Gounder farmers are used to working the Vanna, Nasuva, Chakkilian [agrarian service castes and Dalits] by scolding them and extracting their labor. In the same way, in banian companies the owners have to scold the workers and extract work from them. Owner and worker have to combine, they can't be on different levels. That's why rich owners couldn't stand in this industry. You didn't need to enter with large capital. You just had to work and manage work and the office and quality all at once. Big men couldn't stand. Only small people from modest backgrounds have succeeded.<sup>xxviii</sup>

How did Gounder peasant-workers use specific histories of working and controlling work, expressed as their propensity to toil, as legacies in forging their class mobility while transforming the politics of work? This section turns to the agrarian transition and industrialization in Tiruppur in two stages. First, I explore the transformation of industrial production politics as Gounder peasant-workers made a slow transition from workers to small owners, transforming the politics of production. Second, I turn to how Gounders toil worked in practice in the industrial labor process, harnessing shared agrarian historical and structural relations. I show how, in acts of toil, Gounders remade work while refashioning themselves as a new class of fraternal capital. I conclude with the fissures in the tenuous hegemony of fraternal capital in the wake of deepened, gendered processes of accumulation of capital and surplus labor.

### **Industrialization and Changing Production Politics in Tiruppur**

Gounders narrated their life histories as slow and variegated processes of transition from agriculture in which most peasants were reluctant to leave the land entirely. By the 1950s, many poor Gounder households had diversified income sources considerably: men and boys went to spinning mills, rice mills and the first knitting companies while women often worked in cotton gins. Spinning mills and knitting companies offered rural men relatively privileged forms of waged work in contrast to other working castes and women. Gounder men also dominated the regional Communist labor movement, which emerged from the spinning mills. There were times, I was told by older knitwear workers, when work was regular and unions were strong. When they discussed their specific difference from town workers, Gounder workers spoke in the idiom of toil:

“We came to work from a 10-20 mile radius. All those who have succeeded in Tiruppur have come from more than 15 km. If you look at older families from Tiruppur, with grandparents, reputations, comfortable homes...these people have not succeeded... because they would keep looking at their watch to see when 5:00 came. When it was five, the town worker would take his shirt, cover his head and leave. He'd go off and talk about MGR and Shivaji [film icons] or Lenin and Stalin, he'd talk about film and politics all night long; then he'd come slowly in the morning, never before 8. The rural worker would never talk back to the owner. We would do all sorts of things for the owner: stand by the threshold, get water and tea. The town worker would say 'no, that's not my job' and leave. To workers who listened, the owner would give any work...he'd get O.C. work from

them [*O.C. means free with a hint of hoodwinking or making an angle—an artifact of East India Company language, meaning perquisites that officers could get 'on company' account; it is now a common Tamil expression—SC*] I worked *toiled*; Gounders will *toil*. No other caste would stand against this. We suffered more, *toiled* more.<sup>xxxix</sup>

While I cannot do justice to the range of ways in which Gounders came to Tiruppur as workers and became small owners, narratives such as this one use 'toil' directly to refer to Gounder workers' ability to access a range of people, skills and resources.<sup>xxx</sup> In these types of claims, toil works as a referential sign, marking specific mechanisms of transition; I will return to non-referential uses of the sign in the following section. What is important is that certain Gounders were poised to become multi-skilled through their work careers in stitching, machinery fitting and packing, as all activities in early firms were under one roof in contrast to today's disintegrated labor process. Giraffe Nalasamy, for instance, came from the countryside with his two brothers in the early 1950s after the major drought of 1952-3. He joined Star Bhai's company in 1955 while his two younger brothers went to school.<sup>xxxi</sup> For the first three months, he worked without a wage "to become familiar [*palakkarthukku*]" in an informal apprenticeship. Working for three companies over six years, Nalasamy did stitching, machinery fitting and packing. "Workers of that time learnt all the work. Today's workers don't know anything but the job: if they come to sweep, they only know how to sweep," he said frustratedly. In explicitly contrasting his past with the present, Nalasamy argued that workers like him in the 1950s could become multi-skilled in integrated firms and with broadly defined work contracts.<sup>xxxii</sup>

When Gounders started coming to Tiruppur for work, Coimbatore District was a hotbed of communist unionism led by the Communist Party of India (CPI).<sup>xxxiii</sup> Communists gave voice to the concerns of upwardly-mobile "backward castes" such as Gounders through a vocabulary that represented their concerns in caste and gender-neutral terms. The legacy of union mobilization shaped Gounder workers' engagement in labor politics in Tiruppur in the 1960s, as the entitlements won by unions were eroded through piece-rates and the first stirrings of industrial decentralization. Gentex Palanisamy, one of the "first batch" of Gounders who would become small owners, reflected on the communist party union in which he was involved from 1958 to 1965 as a promoter of class compromise in the context of relatively stable relations between capital and labor. "When I was a worker," he said, "strikes would not come because unions wouldn't tell workers to strike. Problems wouldn't come. There was automatic wage increase."<sup>xxxiv</sup>

"When Velusamy [an older generation labor organizer] was around, on festivals Tiruppur would be red. Now you can't see the leader. Now the leader has phones and scolds owners on the phone. Then there were rules. There were wages even if there was no work, and laborers would make cases for all problems. Now there are direct 'compromises' settled by unions, and if the laborer gets Rs. 5,000 from the company, Rs. 2,000 is kept by the union, Rs. 500 for expenses. Velusamy would make sure that the worker can get back to work. He wouldn't get a settlement and send the worker home."<sup>xxxv</sup>

Another worker of the time, Palanisamy, valued the modest union leader who kept workers at work. “Then a worker could put in 8-10 years *service*; now 8-10 days *service*. There’s no *service* now.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The first stirrings of decentralization linked a transformation in work politics to the erosion of labor’s rights, but the virtuous worker who valued *service* also held the promise of becoming a petty owner.

The recollections of a non-Gounder worker from the 1960s who watched his Gounder comrades rise far beyond his class provides a contrasting narrative that clarifies processes at work in Tiruppur. Arumugam, a Vannar or “washerman” by caste, now irons shirts on a cart in northern Tiruppur, but he used to iron in knitting firms in the 1960s. When he joined Jippy Knitting in 1962, there were 100 workers in one place and he earned Rs. 5.25 a day. Five years later the owner had refused workers benefits and split the company into “4-5 sections...with 15-25 workers each.” His next job was piece-rated, and while had year-round regular work at the beginning of his work career, by the end he said most work was temporary. He explained his decision to leave knitwear work in terms of transformations in production that passed him by, but his explanation of how some workers became owners also hinges on the language of toil.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

“Owners gave all responsibility to the contractor. It’s good profit for the owner. Nobody gets [benefits.] The owner says he has no relationship [to workers]. They kept workers temporary for 10 years even...Actually, through support, that’s how they came [to be owners.] If you are just within a company and are just a worker you cannot do it. Only if someone says in the bank that he knows the worker so put something down, only then can he rise up. *Not from one’s own toil*. There was work for one to nine months. If there was [regular] work there may have been a chance. You can’t be a laborer and come to the front. If someone supports at the bank, one can...There’s no casteism here. Any caste can know the work and do it. [SC: Then how did Gounders ‘rise’?] Yes, they have inheritance. They can manage with inheritance and ‘background.’ They didn’t just do it themselves. Either they have land, or means, or someone gives it to them. It didn’t work for me so I said okay, I’ll do my own work.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Arumugam’s explanation of Gounder success in materialist terms cuts through the ideology of self-made men to the social relations which he saw as enabling Gounder workers to ‘rise’, but he also inadvertently references the centrality of toil while denying its universality.

Arumugam also refuses explanation centered on individual agency, in sharp contrast with Gentex Palanisamy’s retrospective narrative of success which hinges on his “having ‘developed’ capital through self-management [*suyasaambaadiyam*].”<sup>xxxix</sup> An early Gounder peasant-worker to start a partnership powerloom unit with a few stitching machines, Palanisamy split from his partnership when the firm became a full-fledged garment manufacturing company. This type of firm splitting was common among the first generation of workers-turned-owners, as partners routinely broke off to form their own family concerns. However, the new firms were most often not proprietorships but

other partnerships with closer family members and landowning kin who would join as “sleeping partners” who would contribute capital for a profit share but would not be involved in day-to-day production. Palanisamy was reticent in describing how he actively supported others from his village, as he felt some of the recipients of his support have since become big owners and would think he was taking credit for their success. To disrupt the narratives of “self made” men in such a way would be unthinkable: it would betray the caste and gender exclusion that undergirds this individualism. He did, however, drop hints: “One of the main people in Tiruppur is one of our men... Even LMK Balu [a prominent owner] has put together work/industry for many families, their relatives.”<sup>xli</sup> Palanisamy helped start about 5 units in this fashion.<sup>xli</sup>

Early Gounder entrants to the ranks of small ownership often told me they accessed family savings through their mother. Marriage dowries became increasingly important to the initial capital that young Gounder grooms brought into knitwear companies after the export boom of the late 1980s. In 1996-8, my unmarried Gounder friends would tell me how precise dowries have become in relation to broader production and consumption choices. These young men could expect several *pauns* (gold sovereigns), a car and perhaps even a building in town, as befit their value as businessmen whom potential fathers-in-law might want to cement ties with. Older Gounders insisted that it is only now that dowries are given to the bridegroom’s house, and that at one time money was given to the daughter. Muthusamy said, “in my marriage they [his family] gave Rs.125 in *pari panam*” or brideprice, half of which went to expenses of the wedding, while Rs.35 went directly to his wife. Muthusamy exclaimed that Gounder families of the bride would once demand this *pari panam* from the groom’s family. While it is difficult to verify this transition from brideprice to dowry precisely, some part of the brideprice may have provided the new bride a seed for the savings fund as she became a *Goundachi amma*, or mother of the agrarian household. Hence, when *Gounder ex-workers* say they accessed money through their mothers, it is still not clear what kind of discretionary power Gounder mothers had over the family purse-strings, but one can at least surmise that sons could make the strongest claims on these ‘family’ savings.<sup>xliii</sup>

Lenin Kaliappan’s story of class mobility relies first on capital from his mother’s petty agricultural trade in rice which allowed his entry as a partner in a stitching section with Rs.2,500. When his fledgling unit was in financial trouble, he went to his sister, and sold her gold jewelry for Rs.300 to keep running. What is significant is that he could acquire his sister’s jewelry relatively easily. When Kaliappan’s partners left their struggling firm to return to wage work, Kaliappan’s mother again came to his aid by selling off her stock of sacks from agricultural trade for Rs.3000 and allowing Kaliappan to become a proprietor.<sup>xliii</sup> Sometimes mother’s support came in the form of her gold jewelry, perhaps from her dowry. P.P. Natarajan got Rs. 2 thousand from his mother’s gold to augment his savings to make Rs.15 thousand initial capital.<sup>xliv</sup> Blue Sundaram’s mother was able to both secure part of her son’s earnings as a worker and to save for his transition to petty ownership, thereby perpetuating the notion that the *Goundachi amma* held the purse-strings of the Gounder family. When Manickam and his brother decided to start a unit in 1972, their initial capital of Rs.600 came from “mother’s savings.”<sup>xlv</sup> Not all familial relationships were guarantees for nurturing bosses, however. Crown Rangasamy came to



work for his *taimáman*, maternal uncle, at the age of 15. As the owner's sister's *son*, however, he is an inessential *pankali* or "brother", in that the *taimáman* does not have the same rights over his nephew as his niece.<sup>xlvi</sup> Rangasamy began as a helper and received no wage for 15 years, while housed and fed by his uncle. It was only after being a power-table contractor for 7 years that he could save from his earnings in order to start a partnership company. The *taimáman* did not play a significant role in nurturing his nephew's class mobility. On the contrary, in several accounts, familial relations lead to intensified struggles over property, particularly between 'brothers'.<sup>xlvii</sup> A. Duraisamy and K. Saraswati continue to rue the day they wrote the deed for Dint Knitting in the name of Duraisamy's brother Ramasamy, as he proved to be yet another errant *pankalis* who eventually broke off as a proprietor of Dint. Extensive notions of brotherhood were no guarantees of trustworthy ties. Fictive fraternity could be made and broken for entirely instrumental reasons and business in Tiruppur has the drama of a soap opera.<sup>xlviii</sup>

In the context of regional agrarian decline, some young men sought capital and land through familial networks, but claims on family savings often fueled conflict between *pankalis*. When brothers couldn't be convinced to divide assets or pledge family land, marriages provided alternate resources, and women continued in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways to enable the construction of 'self made men.' However, it must be said that many Gounder peasant-workers neither received nor offered much direct support from kin. Of the 42 Gounder males who came from LMK Balu's village to Tiruppur knitwear, 6 came before him, but he said he didn't go searching for his relatives' help. Nor did his mobility rely on support through agricultural land or patronage ties. The fact is that it did not take much capital for Balu to start a small stitching section with two machines that cost Rs. 3 thousand in 1967, worked by him, two brothers and three boys as helpers.<sup>xliv</sup> Slowly, 'brothers' or ex-worker castefellows with different skills would pool resources and talents to start a small unit in which they would do the major work. Capital requirements were low, and often a Gounder boss would support his kin, castefellow or ex-worker to start 'jobwork' units that would work for him when necessary. Self-made men drew on various bits of capital and land through relatives, appearing in records only as 'sleeping partners' who invested capital for a profit-share without interfering in production. In various ways, Tiruppur continued to provide rural families opportunities to divert small savings into partnerships in knitting companies to thereby mitigate some of the increasing risks associated with agricultural decline.

While many new entrants to the ranks of ownership slid back into waged work, where, in the 1970s, income was steady, the mark of arrival was introduction to the bank. Gounders were different from others in that many still had land that could be used to access institutional credit. Peasant households did not sell land unless under extreme duress, choosing instead to pledge their land as collateral for loans, particularly after the nationalized State Bank of India (henceforth SBI) actively supported small industry after 1970. It has become commonplace in Tiruppur that state intervention in industrial organization has been circumspect. Indeed, to paraphrase an economist from Western Tamilnad familiar with these environs, Gounders have succeeded *despite* the state, and it is this success under inhospitable conditions that highlights, in his view, the central role

of the entrepreneur.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the state's primary role has been in protecting specific commodities for the small scale sector, defined in terms of plant and machinery, and in providing subsidies to make firms more competitive. SBI credit was state action of a more interventionist nature that would prove central to agrarian transition and industrial decentralization in Tiruppur. I have discussed the origins of "small scale populism" as a kind of hijacking of Gandhian ideology in Chari (1998), following Tyabji's (1989) general discussion of small-scale industries (SSI) policy in India. While small-scale populism allowed larger capital to make incursions into the small-scale sector in other regions and commodities, in Tiruppur knitwear it enabled upward class mobility and a profusion of owner-operators.

State intervention in the supply of credit, particularly working capital to pay for production in advance of final garment production and sale, fueled both industrial dispersal and class mobility. In the ethnography of SBI's lending practices elaborated in Chari (2004), I use recollections of staff members from the 1960s and 1970s to show how the bank actively sought to support what it saw as the creditworthy peasant:

"1969 onwards, [SBI decided nationally that] loans should be need-based, not security-based. This involved a certain amount of risk. We had to see the person. We had to see his 'background.' A person who has come from the laborers stage to start a unit by himself, he should be an enterprising man. He will not give false promises and he will not go back on his word. After 1972, lots of Gounder community people started coming, once they got loans from banks. Upto Rs.25,000 the bank said you do not need to be security-oriented."<sup>li</sup>

Palanisamy, a staff member in the early 1970s, stressed that more important for security for small loans for new Gounder clients were field officer's estimations of family reputations and the "backgrounds" of potential customers.<sup>lii</sup> Personal connections with established owners were key, and if these were connections through work as well as kinship, they served to reinforce "background." Gounders' expansive notions of kinship served them particularly well under these circumstances. Only for loans over Rs.25 thousand was collateral security necessary, and in these cases Gounders often used agricultural land. When I asked how field officers valued rural land when it was used as security, Palanisamy said field officers "would just go to the village and ask and they would simply say. Generally village people wouldn't lie, at least in those days." As the land market developed early in Coimbatore District, land transactions could be referred to in valuing land, but there was still a remarkable faith in this SBI officer's vision in a kind of rustic honesty that would prevent collusion by villagers in inflating rural land values.<sup>liii</sup> By the late 1970s, SBI was handling 80% of knitwear owners' accounts in Tiruppur despite about 10 other banks in town. In the event of default, SBI was particularly lenient and only in the "few cases of chronic defaulters was security seized, sold and the case was sealed...Usually some amount was generated and slowly paid off." Other banks seem only to have caught up to these particularly liberal practices towards small industrialists only by the 1980s.<sup>liv</sup> While this institutional biography provides a window into the kinds of resources that new owners could use, the carrot of credit is insufficient to explain Gounder advantage in production.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a gradual process of decentralization reshaping work in Tiruppur. Initially, section after section of the labor process underwent a transition from time-rated wages to piece-rates, subsequently codified through Taylorist time-motion studies and institutionalized in collective bargaining agreements. Kongu Velusamy explained piece-work, firm-splitting and subcontracting as moments in a history of class struggle, each phase in the fragmentation of work following significant strike activity.<sup>lv</sup>

Piece rates provided a way in for capital to strip away the rights won through years of labor organization, as owners claimed that piece rates “included” Employee Sickness Insurance (ESI), Provident Fund (PF), Annual Bonus, Gratuity, No-Work Allowance and other bonuses. Piece-rates became a way of lowering the general wage.<sup>lvi</sup> Punyamurthy, a union organizer, claimed that the problem was that workers could actually make money through piece-rates, which is why non-union workers agreed to the new regime of payment and unions had no choice but to comply.<sup>lvii</sup> In response, another union organizer, Mohan Kumar, could not accept that workers desired piece rates: “They say workers suffer and prefer it. That’s not just is it? To say they don’t want their rights isn’t just.”<sup>lviii</sup> Piece rates seemed to cede power over labor-time to workers, offering the appearance of more money without technical change or union action. Punyamurthy and Mohan Kumar reflect debates within the communist unions over workers’ individual interests and broader goals of social justice, but the terms of this struggle were set by capital. Srinivasan was the main negotiator from the domestic owners’ association, SIHMA, who sat across the bargaining table from Mohan Kumar in the intense period of negotiation over the new regime of wage payment. In recalling why owners brought in piece-rates as late as 1972, Srinivasan pointed to the limitations of increasing the rate of exploitation within the working day: “Work was limited in time-bound shift. We wanted to induce labor to give more...to double the quantity.” Piece-rates also provided a way for owners to indiscriminately terminate labor contracts by just saying, as Srinivasan put it, “You take this money and get out!” Yet, the regime of piece rates only radicalized CITU, the new labor union of the breakaway Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM). CITU would subsequently begin to educate its workers so that they would not accept that the Deepavali festival bonus is “included” in the piece rate. Militant union organizers could then directly critique intensified exploitation and the breakdown of workers entitlements.<sup>lix</sup>

With the generalization of piece-rates by the mid-1970s, work politics had been decisively transformed. These memories of owners, ex-workers and unionists collectively reveal a time of rising workers’ entitlements subsequently eroded across the board in the shift to piece rates and contracting. I want in the next section to enter the hidden abode of production, to the stitching sections pried out of integrated firms of an earlier era to house the toiling Gounder and his piece rated workers in the new, intensified politics of work.

### **Using Agrarian Memory: Interpellating Place and Class in Acts of toil**

“Because we came from agricultural families, I can toil.”<sup>lx</sup>

“In the morning I’d go to the bank. In the afternoon I’d watch cutting. I could cut and iron, my two brothers could stitch and another brother could also cut. Since 1967 when we started and at least until each of us got married, we’d all work from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. daily. The reason for our development is bank support and our toil.”<sup>lxi</sup>

The knitwear industry rests centrally on manual labor and on close supervision and labor control in stitching sections, where cut-pieces of knitted cloth are stitched into batches of garments of particular shapes and sizes. Batch production of garments is particularly suited to separating stitching from the rest of the labor process. Overwhelmingly peasant-workers started out as owners by starting small, dependent stitching sections. As they worked alongside their hired labor at the power table, these ‘toiling owners’ were drawing from their histories of agrarian work that were part of their identities as Gounder peasants. This brings me to the geography of work practice, where the agrarian past is used in remaking the industrial present.

Gounder workers did not make a smooth transition from worker to owner; they worked in their own firms for an average of 5 and 8 years, for exporters and domestic producers respectively. As owners, they tended not to rely on family labor, but worked alongside their hired labor. A Gounder leader suggested that this was because “Gounder community has a knack of extracting work in a mutually beneficial manner.”<sup>lxii</sup> What quotidian practices of the shopfloor lay behind this “knack”? ACT Selvaraj, a Naidu industrialist who has watched the rise of Gounders around him, explained their advantage in working “close to labor in order to take advantage of the rights of labor; they could extract more work without paying attention to workers’ rights.” Working-class owners had decentralized spatial practices of work to bridge the gulf between owner and worker. Selvaraj explained how Gounder workplaces of the 1960s and 1970s were different in that “the owners’ table was close to the cutting section...Profit was counted in the cutting section and all problems were seen visibly there. Owners would watch each lot and calculate on the cutting table.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Gounder owners’ social and spatial closeness to workers accentuated their ability to control work directly.

In part this was a calculated move. Gounders were less educated than other owners and many workers, as my survey evidence indicates. They often hired a *kanakku pillai* or accountant to take care of the books while they took care of the practical task of manufacturing banians. On the shopfloor, the working-class owner could use his practical knowledge in production. I found on several occasions that these Gounder owners were the hardest to convince of an interview until it was clear that I wanted to know of their personal histories and lived experience.<sup>lxiv</sup> On the other hand, I also met slick accountants who told me, as I persisted for interviews, to forget the uneducated boss: “what would he know, he’s only studied till the 3<sup>rd</sup> [grade.]”

Moreover, most Gounders had finished their careers as wage-workers in stitching or cutting, or as contractors of ‘power table sections,’ and had typically become multi-skilled in the central production tasks of garment manufacture. My survey evidence, detailed in Chari (2004), shows that most also entered the division of labor as owners in stitching sections. By the early 1970s, there were a profusion of *taiyal nilayangal* or independent “stitching sections” which bought cut-pieces and produced garments. These units were profoundly frustrating for industrial elites like Soundappa Chettiar:

“[By 1972,] a large number of small units appeared with a few knitting machines and began to sell knitted fabrics. These *pseudo-manufacturers* are mostly traders [who] get the yarn knitted from knitting units, have the fabric bleached at a bleaching unit and get it tailored from a tailoring unit according to their own standard. The[y] have no stake in business...[and] not responsible for statutory obligations such as factory license, E.S.I., P.F. and gratuity. The composite units represent the industry in the *real* sense.”<sup>lxv</sup>

This textile mill owner was disturbed by decentralization because it had begun to upset the older industrial order. While he decries these “pseudo-manufacturers”, on the contrary these units marked a transition to a modern form of subcontracting based on tighter control of labor-power in both the detail and social division of labor. In fact, Gounders of worker origins were moving beyond the exchange-centered visions of the old guard, to decentralized production and increase exploitation in a new spatial order of work.

There is a danger in taking toil at face value, as a Gounder rendition of Marx’s labor theory of value. In order to avert the fetishism of individual agency in the self-presentations of Gounder entrepreneurs, I use turn to the concept of *interpellation*, to explain how shared historical, spatial and structural relations are instantiated, maintained and transformed in practice. My argument is that Gounder worker-peasants were interpellated through ongoing *acts* of toil as a class fraction with particular advantages in the division of labor. This ongoing process of interpellation was located in new spatial practices of decentralized, networked work in stitching, through which Gounder peasant-workers made space in the division of labor to draw in and make bosses of ‘brothers.’ Class mobility and the making of bosses allowed Gounder men to link power over the labor process to power over social labor in a new politics of work. Consequently, they remade industrial work while remaking themselves as fraternal capital.

The crucial point in stressing *acts* of toil is that the sign ‘toil’ functions not just referentially, as I have shown rural workers to reference various practices as part of the way in which they worked, but also indexically. Brusquely put, linguistic anthropologists drawing from pragmatic and materialist traditions of semiotics, particularly from the philosopher C. S. Peirce’s distinctions between icon, index and symbol, argue that while referential signs such as symbols name or describe in arbitrary ways defined by changeable conventions, non-referential signs are linked to objects in less arbitrary ways. Hence, icons work by resembling that which they represent, as statues resemble particular people. Indexical signs are the least arbitrary of signs, pointing towards the objects or

relations through which they have been produced. In order for indexical signs to work, participants must implicitly understand their context of production and use. This shared context, as Alaina Lemon clarifies, “is not limited to the ‘real-time’ here and now but can include knowledge about the past, about social hierarchies, or about cultural and generic associations.”<sup>lxvi</sup> Acts of Gounder toil in the division of labor allow specific agrarian structural and historic relations to interpellate the production of place and class.

While engaged in these new spatial practices at work, these Gounder men were inadvertently renovating a history of agrarian work. Indeed, the centrality of manual labor in stitching and the need for participant supervision and labor control were familiar to Gounders of modest agrarian roots. Gounders could draw on an agrarian work politics forged in the 1930s, hinged on the farmer’s participant supervision of differentiated labor arrangements. Remembered through a colonial lens as a propensity of their caste to toil, Gounders could renovate this shared agrarian past in the industrial present. Elite failures, detailed in Chari (2004) and including aristocratic *Kaniyalar* Gounders, the older guard of industrialists, and large Indian textile houses, can be seen as failures in part because they did not carry these advantages of toil. In contrast, Gounders could secure more absolute surplus value through the sweating of labor *and* more relative surplus value through organizational innovation, to turn their toil into capital.

The hermeneutics of interpellation can only be understood ethnographically, with attention to the ways in which subjects are recruited differently by also making room for acts of misrecognition.<sup>lxvii</sup> In other words, self-made Gounder men can hinge their retrospective narratives of success on *their toil*, naturalizing the sign as marking *their* difference precisely because they are the privileged subjects whose specific historically-constituted capacities are hailed in everyday acts at work. As an indexical sign in the labor process, toil works specifically for Gounder men who implicitly relate to the context of its production and use. Today’s flexible proletariat do not, for the most part, recognize themselves as *ulaippalis* or toilers in this respect. On the rare occasions that non-Gounders stake claims to being able to turn their toil into capital, they know that toil is *not quite* their advantage, and yet some non-Gounder workers have used the structural openings in Tiruppur’s industry to forge their routes of class mobility. This *misrecognition* is key to the dialectics of toil, as it both hails all workers to realize the value of their labors, while valorizing the specific labors of successful Gounder owners. Precisely because toil recruits subjects selectively, it becomes the linguistic means for reworking social and spatial difference.<sup>lxviii</sup>

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gounder industrialists had remade the industry through two means. First, in attempt to consolidate their ‘hegemony’ over the cluster, a small group of Gounder owners launched a successful putsch in the main owners’ association, the South India Hosiery Manufacturers’ Association (SIHMA). While SIHMA was controlled by a mix of Muslims, Chettiars, Mudaliars and a few Gounders in the 1950s, it had by the 1970s become Gounder dominated. For the ensuing decade, SIHMA ruled industrial relations in Tiruppur and managed to discipline militant unions into a new order of class conciliation. Indeed, this paralleled the emergence of Gounders in all prominent public positions in local politics and social associations such as the

Rotary and Lions' Clubs, almost to the exclusion of all other communities ever since. Older monuments in Tiruppur's public spaces have been forgotten with the installation of the dazzling silver statue of Palanisamy Gounder as "Tiruppur *Tandai*", Father of Tiruppur, at the most important intersection in town. By the 1970s, Gounders had become the upstart elite.

Second, and in a more gradual manner, Gounder owners elaborated the process of industrial decentralization and contracting through networks of "sister concerns" tied through relations of fraternity and ownership. Contracting, in turn, met the increased requirements for labor supervision and control necessitated by the production of 'Fine' or 40s-count banians that consolidated Tiruppur's reach over the all-India market. SIHMA build its dominance over collective labor in the 1970s through the institutionalization of piece rates and collective bargaining procedures at precisely the time when Tiruppur began to produce Fine banians. Through SIHMA, the Madras Productivity Council conducted Taylorist time-motion studies in Tiruppur to regularize piece-rates for various categories of workers working on different categories of yarn. Unions were drawn reluctantly into the process of instituting these piece-rates through the mediation of the Industrial Tribunal in Madras, and SIHMA's dominance over the new regime of variable wages was sealed for the while. Unions continued to fight these institutionalized workloads as inordinately high and unsupportable of a living wage.<sup>lxi</sup>

With the split in the communist labor unions at the national level in 1970, following the division of the Communist Party in India in 1964, CITU emerged as the radical arm of labor organizing in the 1970s, where it quickly gained ground to rival its parent AITUC in membership by the mid-1970s. A series of General Strikes in the first half of the 1970s reflect the rise of this radical section of the labor movement. In parallel, however, the industrial form was progressively decentralized through the contracting of garment stitching.<sup>lxx</sup> Often loyal or "familial" workers would be kept in charge of garment sections and were given contracts for work by the owners, who could then say they *owned the machines but not the work*. Union strength dropped from 100% under the undivided communist union to less than 60% with the spread of contracting in the 1970s. Moreover, while unions forced SIHMA to negotiate through strikes in 1972 and 1973, a 60-day General Strike in 1974 was a dismal failure due to the withdrawal of support from the older labor union of the undivided Communist Party of India, AITUC.<sup>lxxi</sup>

Sister concerns were a key strategy through which Gounder fraternal capital could allow Gounder toil to be writ large over the social division of labor. By the 1970s, the leading Gounders of worker-peasant origins had institutionalized their power over the industrial cluster by taking over the main owners' association and secured a long period of class conciliation with the communist labor unions. It seemed until the 1980s that the Gounder fraternity had forged its hegemony over industrial work.

There were spaces for small acts of resistance, no doubt. In 1974, a prominent Gounder owner of working class origins started a second production unit, a sister concern, and refused to give workers in the new unit the same wages and benefits as the other. A series of posters, unsanctioned by the labor unions, showed up on all the main streets to

the bus station, portraying Nalasamy The Worker next to Nalasamy the Owner: on one side as a thin, monkeyish, emaciated worker and on the other as a fat, cigarette-smoking owner. It read “*Andre ni, Indre ni*”: “You then, You now,” using the impolite form of ‘you’ nonetheless. This lampoon of class mobility was a spontaneous critique of Gounder toil from the crowd, and a damning one.

In Chari (2004) I show how, in the transition to export production in the 1980s, in interaction with wider discourses and practices of the ‘feminization’ of garment production, and with the massive entry of women into the workforce, fraternal hegemony through Gounder toil would give to a new gender regime at work. Shifting hegemonies in Tiruppur’s capitalism show how gender regimes mediate the accumulation of both capital and surplus labor. On the one hand, an apex class fraction of exporters have risen out of the fraternity of small capital, but the trace of Gounder toil persists in new guises in the age of exports. On the other hand, the gap between institutionalized rights and workplace realities has only been widening through the increasing fragmentation of work and deepening exploitation combined with the routine use of sexual violence. Between these two dynamics of accumulation, fraternal capital steers its tenuous path.

Gounder toil encapsulates the dialectical tensions of Tiruppur’s modernity. In the engagement of worker-owners in stitching sections, toil breaks with historicism of an orthodox Marxist account of agrarian transition. By transforming the structure of work from within, Gounders of modest origins open a route for continued class mobility through toil while challenging an ‘ascriptive’ notion of caste as determinative of occupation and social location. If self-made men are the liberal antithesis of caste, their toil also provokes a revolutionary challenge to capitalism by summing up the specific demands of the exploited to the fruits of labor and the dignity of work. As a translational device, toil is a double-voiced tool. On the one hand, it speaks of a particular use of the past in shaping a peasant-worker transition to capitalism. On the other hand, toil emerges from a singular history of work that is used to resignify caste and gender relations in knitwear work. Agrarian memory is an unlikely resource for industrialization, and yet it is key to the transitions enacted by Tiruppur’s self-made men.

### **Conclusion: The Return of *Toil***

I met Mr. Doha early in my research in Tiruppur, in 1996. He said he was a Bangladeshi settled in New Jersey, who had come to Tiruppur as a representative of a U.S. apparel company along with his assistant, a white American called Lisa. I must admit I was suspicious early on. Mr. Doha spoke with an affected twang that barely concealed a strong Bengali accent, as if he was trying very concertedly to sound *foreign*. Every once in a while, he would fish out a picture from his wallet, of himself posing with his Porsche in front of his New Jersey home, and he provided me, and anyone else, with a long list of cellular phone numbers at which he could be reached in the U.S. If this was his evidence, I knew I had a story. Little did I know what it would be.



Once, while I tried to get an interview with him, Mr. Doha, who never asked to be called by his first name, Syed, asked me to come with him on his routine. We were driven around town, first to a black-market shop to get him and Lisa imported toothbrushes, then to a company which was trying to secure an order from him. Mr. Doha looked squarely at the young owner and asked if they employ child labor, and the man said “no”, looking back just as squarely. Mr. Doha turned to me and said he would never stand for child labor in his products. He knew I was a researcher, and he knew how to present himself as the kind face of corporate responsibility.

Through the tinted windows of his car, Mr. Doha recounted how impossible it would be to get around without a vehicle, but he feared he was too popular to walk around in Tiruppur. He laughed as he confessed to me that he couldn't even open the car window without being mobbed, and that if he ran for mayor, he would probably be elected. The exporter in the front seat, sitting with the driver, laughed appreciatively. Mr. Doha certainly knew the importance of performance.

That afternoon, we ate in the restaurant of the Velan Hotel, where Mr. Doha was running a large tab entertaining all sorts of men who sought to work with him on various projects. When he talked, the table came to a hush. He spoke of the new venture he wanted to launch in the Maldives, in which many of the men at the table seemed to consider a lucrative investment opportunity. He also joked about his first trip to Madras, when he claimed to rent out the entire top floor of the Connemara Hotel in order to wine and dine notable politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. The question was not whether he was ready for the Maldives, but whether the Maldives was ready for Mr. Doha.

The next time I saw Mr. Doha was at a party at his home, a cottage offered rent-free by influential people in Tiruppur. The scene was like E.M. Forster's famously sarcastic rendition of the colonial 'Bridge Party', which was to bridge the cultures of Britain and India. British women were far in the interior of the house with the most important British officers, British subalterns and Indian officers spilling out onto the verandah, and most invited Indian women farther out in the gardens. I walked in and out of this postcolonial bridge party, imagining gradations of racialized authority extending to the street outside. Lisa had left the inner sanctum of the house only once, giggling after being dressed in a sari. Mr. Doha carried his own bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label, Duty Free, as he swaggered in and out of Lisa's air-conditioned room, making small talk to some of the men in the house in his peculiar foreign accent. My younger friends, eager to get contracts, were consigned to the outer section of the compound, but within reach of flowing alcohol and sizzling meat, compliments of Velan Hotel.

When I returned to India less than a year later, the first person I mentioned the name Doha to, in Chennai, told me never to repeat it unless I wanted trouble. Mr. Doha, it appeared, had absconded with large sums of money, leaving many men in Tiruppur in the lurch. He had played their homosociality, down to alcohol and the lure of a white woman and global markets, and he had extorted from all of them successfully. Mr. Doha's fraudulence proves by example that forms of gendering can be legible to wider circuits of accumulation. Indeed, Mr. Doha's effectiveness in performing a legible masculinity to a

range of exporters in Tiruppur was key to globalization by fraud. Rumor has it that Mr. Doha now lives large on an unnamed island with Lisa. Needless to say, his cell phones were not taking my calls in 1998.

A disgusted exporter said to me, “He was just an employee of some company. He wasn’t even an owner.” The trace of toil persists, even after the fraternity has been played to the hilt.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> For instance, Roseberry (1989), Hart (1986) and Watts (1982).

<sup>ii</sup> For a general introduction to politics in Tamilnad, see MIDS 1988 and for Kerala, see Kannan 1988 and Heller 1999. Certainly there were regions of CPI activism in other parts of Tamilnad as well, as in Thanjavur District, but the fact that communist organizing in a region of highly polarized class and caste relations made for a much more militant history of mobilization centered on Dalit labor.

<sup>iii</sup> Nicholson, 1887, p.260. *Ryot* refers to a smallholder with long-term rights to land conferred by the state under the *ryotwari* system of land tenure, which was supposed to create a class of capitalist smallholders, in contrast with the *zamindari* system which was supposed to create “improving” landlords. This British imaginary of types of capitalism would be undermined in practice, as Ranajit Guha (1963) demonstrated of *zamindari* in Bengal. *Ryotwari* similarly faltered in creating capitalist *ryots* because of the ambiguity of land deeds, which only intensified with their transfer through inheritance and debt. However, these systems of land tenure do explain some of the broader contours of spatial inequality in India, as *ryotwari* areas of South and West India are precisely where agrarian capitalism would take hold in postcolonial India (see Terry Byres 1991, Ravi Srivastava 1995).

<sup>iv</sup> This only renders more complicated the task of excavating what Nicholas Dirks (2001:7) calls the modern career of caste, through dynamics of ethnicization and localization. Elsewhere, Dirks (1996: 268-9) identifies the work of a specific ideological dualism of Brahman/ anti-Brahman in South India that has become commonsense in a variety of political positions, even lending tacit support to contemporary forms of Brahman power in Tamilnad. The rise of backward caste power, such as the economic power of the Gounders of Tiruppur, disrupts this formula fundamentally, but it poses new challenges to rendering alternate historical anthropologies of caste.

<sup>v</sup> Zacharias 1950, pp. 94-95.

<sup>vi</sup> Draught power was readily available through the older order of cattle raising and ranching. The *Pattagar of Palaikottai*, the ‘lineage heads’ of the Gounders, raised prized Kangayam cattle. When I met the current *Palaikottai Pattagar* in 1996 in his decaying palace on the outskirts of Kangayam town, he had me taken first to see his magnificent Kangayam bulls. Cattle rearing on poorer lands complemented and spurred smallholder farming on better soils, a marked contrast to impoverished subsistence cultivation on poor lands in the plains. (Baker, pp. 200-3)

<sup>vii</sup> “Murder was a local pastime and Coimbatore had for a long time led the province in this respect; by the 1930s many of the murders revolved around land. [A] local historian noted that the Gounder farmers were ‘easily affected by land disputes. Even an inch of ground or a small water-course or the right to a palmyra tree or a tamarind tree standing on the edge [of a plot] would result in the chopping off a head’” (Baker, p. 212.) The image of the violent Gounder, passionate about land, persists in popular representations, as in the film *Cinna Gounder*.

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<sup>viii</sup> Baker, p.214.

<sup>ix</sup> Baker pp. 205-7, Cederlöf p. 99.

<sup>x</sup> Ayyar 1933, p. 172.

<sup>xi</sup> Baker, p. 210.

<sup>xii</sup> Baker relied on research on Perumanallur and Madathupalayam villages to the north of Tiruppur; both were Gounder-dominated *ryotwari* villages, in which *ryots* or smallholders were granted long-term leases of land by the colonial state. (Ganesamurthy 1935.)

<sup>xiii</sup> Zacharias 1950, pp. 44-45. Electric pumps were the most significant form of mechanization in Coimbatore District.

<sup>xiv</sup> Most of the Gounders I interviewed in Tiruppur only switched to electric pumpsets in the late 1960s, with the earliest electrification in 1951. Though the Pykara hydroelectric works was operational after 1929, and electrification spread through the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s, it was only by the 1950s that rural electrification in the fields of Coimbatore District made electric pumps or ‘pumpsets’ viable. Most of my Gounder respondents, all from nearby farms, said their wells were dug in their grandfathers’ times, around the 1930s. All used *kavalai* irrigation for their wet-land or *tóttam* on the order of 10 acres. Almost all Gounders I talked to also said their families had hired-in labor since their childhood. Mechanization was slow, but reliance on hired-in labor alongside family labor was strong since around the 1930s. (Field Notes and Interviews, 1996-8)

<sup>xv</sup> The evidence of Sir George Paddison, *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, Vol III: Evidence taken in the Madras Presidency*, 1927, pp. 313-314.)

<sup>xvi</sup> Cederlöf, p. 104.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ganesamurthy, p. 272.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ganesamurthy, p. 275.

<sup>xix</sup> Gopalaratnam, p. 525.

<sup>xx</sup> “[H]is wife manages the household and works in the fields. A small vegetable garden and a cow or a buffalo are looked after by her. She gathers the harvest, disposes of the vegetables, milk, butter and ghee at the shandy nearby or...at her own house. With the money realized, and supplementing, at will, the income which her husband gets from the crops he raises, she maintains the whole family.” Gopalaratnam.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bairoch’s argument was that urban centers like Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester displaced the old county seats by emerging out of “over-grown industrial villages.” Bairoch 1988, p.22, cited in Rukmini (1993), p. 7.

<sup>xxii</sup> Harriss-White, p.81.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Harriss-White, p.81.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Baker p.268-9.

<sup>xxv</sup> Baker, p.272-4

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Rukmini, Chapter 7.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Interview with Zintex Srinivasan, Jul 19, 1997.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Interview with New Saturn Nalasamy Gounder, March 12, 1997.

<sup>xxix</sup> Interview with Tommy Kandasamy, Jun 11, 1997.

<sup>xxx</sup> See Chari (2000, 2004) for more on ‘routes of entry and accumulation’ in Tiruppur knitwear.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The convention of naming owners in Tiruppur is to call him by his company and then given name. ‘Giraffe Nalasamy’ is therefore Nalasamy, owner of Giraffe Knitting Company. ‘Bhai’, brother in Hindi-Urdu, is a term of respect in the south for Muslims, hence ‘Star Babu Bhai’ or simply ‘Star Bhai’ is Babu Bhai, owner of Star Knitting Company. I have changed all names of living people.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Interview with Giraffe Nalasamy, Jun 11, 1997.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The communist movement in Madras city was dominated by Brahmins in its early days. Unlike the rest of India, where the CPI has its strength in industrial labor and the CPM among agrarian labor and the rural poor, in Tamilnad the situation is reversed. The CPI led efforts to organize Dalit agrarian labor in the paddy fields of Thanjavur District, while the CPM has a strong following in industrial Madras and Coimbatore.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Interview with Gentex Palanisamy, 28 Feb, 1997.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Interview with Gentex Palanisamy.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Interview with Gentex Palanisamy. The English word ‘*service*’ is a Tamil idiom for sustained relations between owner and worker. Employers use it to bemoan dying loyalty from workers, while older workers use it in speaking of lost entitlements and job security. A union leader said to me, “If you have permanent workers, you can’t fire them at your convenience and they are covered *service-aha* [or as befits *service*] by ESI, PF, gratuity and other legal entitlements.” (Interview with Mohan Kumar, Dec 13, 1996.)

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Interview with Arumugam, May 17, 1997.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Interview with Arumugam.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Interview with Gentex Palanisamy, 28 Feb, 1997.

<sup>xl</sup> My translation is clumsy: *tholil* is ‘industry’ as a form of production and also as experienced work (as is often forgotten in spoken English) so I continue to say work/industry where both meanings apply. *Panni kutukartu*, literally ‘making and giving’ which I translate as ‘put together’ implies that someone other than the owner of the company has arranged capital and other sorts of relationships to enable business.

<sup>xli</sup> Interview with Gentex Palanisamy.

<sup>xlii</sup> Interview with Muthusamy Gounder, Nov 26, 1996. Women were significant wage earners in seasonal agricultural operations since the 1930s, as well as in vegetable sales and cotton ginning, the last of which accounted for a significant share of familial earnings reinvested by Gounder ‘self made’ men. (I am grateful to a questioner after my talk at the



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Institute for Development Alternatives at Katha-South Publishers, Chennai, Feb 1996, for asking me how the Goundachhi amma secured an agrarian surplus, though I am only able to provide a partial response.)

<sup>xliii</sup> Lenin Kaliappan, Feb 13, 1997.

<sup>xliv</sup> Interview with P. P. Natarajan, SIHMA Survey No. 164.

<sup>xlv</sup> Blue Sundaram, SIHMA Survey No. 31. Elan Manickam also said he gave his earnings to his mother (SIHMA Survey No. 81.) Ragam Tex Sundaram said saving was possible when he received good wages, all of which went to his mother for family expenses. Implicit in this is that he was an occasional depositor rather than controller of the savings fund, which could have been the mother (SIHMA Survey No. 82.)

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Pankali* literally means “shareholder” and refers to agnates who can inherit property, but in popular usage it extends to include fictive ‘brothers’ who can share ownership as patrilineal male kin would.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Interview with Crown Ramasamy, SIHMA Survey No. 132.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Interview with Yummy Garments Duraisamy and Saraswati, SIHMA Survey No. 135.

<sup>xlix</sup> Interview with LMK Balasubramaniam, Feb 26, 1997.

<sup>l</sup> Indeed, for Neelakantan (1996), it seems that development is entirely fortuitous and the agents he describe were indeed self made. To be fair to his own experience, Neelakantan told me in passionate terms the effect of the Non-Brahmin Movement on his own sense of possibility as a young man in Western Tamilnad. Though neither Periyar nor the movement had an overt influence in Tiruppur’s political culture, it has worked discursively and behind the scenes in reworking the meaning of caste.

<sup>li</sup> Interview with SBI Manager, Palanisamy, Jul 14, 1997.

<sup>lii</sup> Interview with SBI Palanisamy.

<sup>liii</sup> Interview with SBI Palanisamy.

<sup>liv</sup> Interview with Raghavan

<sup>lv</sup> Kongu Knitting Velusamy Gounder, March 9, 1997.

<sup>lvi</sup> Interview with Punyamurthy, Nov 30 1996.

<sup>lvii</sup> Interview with Punyamurthy.

<sup>lviii</sup> Interview with Mohan Kumar.

<sup>lix</sup> Interview with Zintex Srinivasan, Jul 19, 1997.

<sup>lx</sup> Interview with Lenin Kaliappan, Feb 13, 1997. The translation is awkward because “*ulaippu irukkithe enkitte*” literally means “I have toil”, a claim to an attribute rather than a practice.

<sup>lxi</sup> Interview with LMK Balu, Feb 26, 1997

<sup>lxii</sup> Chairman Velusamy, May 13, 1997.

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<sup>lxiii</sup> ACT Selvaraj, Nov 2, 1997.

<sup>lxiv</sup> One owner told me several times from the shopfloor, to come back again as the owner was indisposed. I kept up my visits until we got to be friendly enough for him to trust that I wouldn't belittle his lack of formal education and would value his story of class mobility.

<sup>lxv</sup> Soundappa Chettiar, in Mandakini 1983; my emphasis. "E.S.I., P.F. and gratuity" are workers' benefits.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Lemon (2000), p.25. I am grateful to Alaina Lemon for distinguishing in my work between people's narrative renditions of toil, and enactments of toil in which where the sign 'toil' takes on its indexical character, allowing shared context to interpellate the present. (Personal Communication, Fall Semester 2000.)

<sup>lxvii</sup> If interpellation is the way in which subjects are 'hailed'—as Althusser's (1971) policeman hails a jaywalker—then the problem remains as to why the hermeneutic circle closes: why the jaywalker knows she is the one being hailed, or why, for that matter, the policeman knows whom to hail.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Eagleton 1991, pp. 142-6; Thanks to Anand Pandian for starting me off in rethinking interpellation as an ongoing process, Berkeley, 1999. I am particularly grateful to Marina Welker of the Anthropology Department at the University of Michigan for very asking "how the concept ['toil'] interpellates a caste- and gender-marked class fraction...Is toil used in a selective fashion (emplotted in a retrospective narrative of success), or is it rather indiscriminately used but only selectively operating due to misrecognition? Perhaps you could say more about the pragmatics of invoking toil." (Class Comments #15, April 17, 2001, 'Agrarian Questions' Seminar in Anthropology and History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.)

<sup>lxix</sup> Cawthorne 1990, p. 212-214 and Appendix 7.

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<sup>lxx</sup> Palaniappan claims that the old union leader Velusamy learned about contracting through a 1961 Central Government Order to end contract work in all industries; in this rendition, Velusamy then explained it to the leadership of SIHMA as a way of increasing production. (Interview with Palaniappan.)

<sup>lxxi</sup> Interview with Palaniappan; although the numbers must be taken with a grain of salt, the decline is evident across interview evidence I have collected from the period. Also Durairaj 1996.