Chapter 5
Labour under Flexible Accumulation

In the case of the knitwear district in Tiruppur, a phenomena that has been acclaimed, but not examined enough, is the prevalence of high vertical mobility, relatively high wage-rates and multi-skilled workers, all key requisites for a ‘high road’ trajectory. This is particularly noteworthy, given the fact that, only in a few instances, do clusters in peripheral economies exhibit features normally associated with industrial districts in core economies. Hence, this chapter addresses two related issues; one, the modes of labour use and their role in sustaining the ‘flexible’ accumulation process in Tiruppur and two, the implications of these modes of labour use for the future trajectory of the cluster.

A. Introduction

The growth of the knitwear industry in Tiruppur has obviously led to a tremendous increase in employment opportunities, since the industry is highly labour-intensive. In fact, time and again, the Tiruppur region has been referred to in popular journals and newspapers as an island of labour scarcity in a labour surplus economy. The numerous hand-written hangouts outside the firms seeking to recruit workers for various kinds of jobs have become a part of medialore. This diffusion of the notion of labour scarcity appears to have played a crucial role in drawing migrant labour to Tiruppur from distant regions.

The increase in demand for labour, as observed in Chapter 3, has been met through three main sources. One, agricultural workers and workers engaged in other informal activities in the neighbouring villages and towns have moved into the knitwear industry in large numbers since the mid-1980s. Decline in agricultural employment and crises in other traditional employment absorption sectors like handloom and vessel-making appear to be the key push-factors that induced this phenomenon (Rutherford 1980).¹ Workers from other districts soon followed, especially from the south and south-east regions of Tamil

¹ The increasing replacement of metallic utensils with plastic ones appears to have led to the declining fortunes of the traditional vessel making industry in Anupparpalayam near Tiruppur.
Labour is also drawn from the bordering districts of Kerala. Within this migrant labour force, two distinct types can be identified. One section of the workers consists of permanent migrants. They come as entire families with each member taking up various kinds of jobs in the industry. Temporary workers constitute at least 30 percent of the migrant worker population (Natarajan, interview). They come to Tiruppur during the peak season and return immediately to their native villages or towns, only to return the following year. They work until Diwali festival during which economic incentives for the season are disbursed. Subsequently, they leave for their native regions, mostly to undertake agricultural work as this period coincides with the harvest season. An informant cites, in 1997, on the day before Diwali, three lakh tickets were sold for buses leaving Tiruppur for the districts of Tanjore, Pudukottai, Ramnad, Tirunelveli, Madurai and Dindigul in Tamil Nadu (Manoharan, interview). Though the accuracy of this estimate may be doubted, it does indicate the relative magnitude of the migrant work force in Tiruppur.

The third mode of sourcing labour is through the increasing incorporation of women into the labour force, both from the local and migrant population. This 'feminisation' of the workforce coincides with the entry of Tiruppur into the export market. In the earlier phases of the industry's growth, the presence of women was minuscule, especially when compared to other important centres of knitwear production during that period. Since then, women workers have catered greatly to labour demands, arising due to an increase in the quantum of existing jobs as well as in the new jobs created due to the increasing export orientation of the region. Checking of stitched garments for faults, a new job associated with quality requirements of the export market, is undertaken solely by women. Next, female child workers, who had joined as helpers in the mid-1980s, have moved on to become tailors and now account for nearly 40 per cent of the workers employed in stitching (Natarajan, interview; Manoharan, interview). Migrant women too are being employed in many staging firms like dyeing and bleaching, printing and computerised embroidery units.

The labour supply is further augmented by the enhanced use of child labour. The increase in stitching warrants an increase in the number of helpers and this is usually met only through child labour. Here again, migration plays an important role as migrant families
invariably send their children to these units to supplement family income. Secondary data collected from the Inspectorate of Factories, though confined to the 'formal' section of knitwear production, point to a clear increase in the proportion of female labour employed since the mid-1980s (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Changing Profile of Labour in the Tiruppur Knitwear Formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total no: factories</th>
<th>Sub. Returns</th>
<th>Total emp.</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Share of female labour (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>28298</td>
<td>19892</td>
<td>8406</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>12263</td>
<td>8804</td>
<td>3459</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>4338</td>
<td>4013</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>2235</td>
<td>1725</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sub. Returns = Factories that Submit Returns; emp= employed; Female labour employment figures combine that of ‘women’ and ‘girl’ workers. ‘Boys’ and ‘girls’ refer to child workers below the age of 14 years.

Source: Adapted from Inspectorate of Factories List, Palladam Taluk 1985, and Tiruppur Taluk for Remaining Years.

The data are highly unreliable insofar as the magnitude is concerned, as only 904 factories are listed for 1998. Further, data for the year 1990 is very inaccurate and not consistent with the data for the remaining years. One glaring omission is the employment of child labour. It is clear from visits to the numerous units that helpers in all stitching units are child workers, except in a few direct exporting firms. These limitations notwithstanding, the data is definitely useful to indicate broad trends in the composition of labour, duration of employment and the growth of the industry. The important observation for our purpose is the phenomenal growth in the use of female labour. From around 21 per cent in 1985, the proportion of female labour in the total workforce has increased to 33.8 per cent. In absolute terms, the number is very high when we consider the fact that the total workforce has increased from an average of 2000 workers to nearly 30,000 workers in 1998. Further, we also observe an increase in the entry of adolescent ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ into the industry.

Earlier, we highlighted the clear segmentation of the labour market in terms of gender, age, place of origin and caste. The creation of such distinct labour segments and the changes in the product market have definite implications for the modes of labour use in
the knitwear industry. In the following sections, we seek to understand the changes in various aspects of labour use during a period when the product market has become increasingly ‘flexible’. These changes in the labour market structure are then related to labour market characteristics of a typical industrial district. This would enable us comprehend the similarities and contrasts in the relationship between capital and labour and therefore shed light on the path that the cluster may traverse in the future as it seeks to sustain or improve its position in the world garment sector.

To begin with, we follow the classical labour process analyses to examine the modes of labour use in the workplace (Marx 1976; Braverman 1974; Knights and Willmott 1990; Zimbalist 1979). However, practitioners of radical economic geography like Harvey (1982) and Peet (1978) argue that the control over reproduction of labour power outside the factory is equally important. They highlight the crucial role played by capital in creating a 'built environment' to sustain the reproduction of labour power. This built environment conditions the extent of access to important resources like education, healthcare, housing and further shapes the attitudes of its inhabitants. Hence, subsequently, we attempt to capture changes in conditions of reproduction of labour power like modes of skill acquisition, access to education, housing, health and constraints to such access. Finally, informed by the 'high' road versus 'low road' debate on the paths that industrial clusters take, we examine the future prospects for various segments of the labour force.

Information on these aspects is collected from both study firms and individual workers. The sample selection is purposive, and workers are chosen from each job type. Over 100 workers employed in different occupations were interviewed. A few workers from each job type are taken up to obtain in-depth information on their life and work histories. As for the rest, information collected is limited to their wage rates, mode of payment, place of origin, number of family members involved in the industry, period of unemployment in the previous two years, work experience and job turnovers. A structured questionnaire was used to collect information (Appendix 5.1). Care was taken to include as many job types as possible. The following table provides a break-up of the workers studied (Table 5.2).
Table 5.2
Job Profile of Workers Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Profile</th>
<th>Number Studied</th>
<th>Women workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fabrication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine Operator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checkers/cone winders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cone winders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finishing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimming</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranging and Folding</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer Tailor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironmen</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailors-Overlock</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailors-Flatlock</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailors-Overlock and Flatlock</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutter</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern master</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button fixing tailor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling/Packing workers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powertable Contractor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calendering</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boiler Operator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine Tender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen, more workers in the finishing units have been chosen given the primacy of these units in the production structure and the labour-intensive nature of operations in these units. As for the staging firms, we have chosen workers roughly in proportion to the number of jobs available. Women workers are chosen purposively within each job type and the number chosen within each job type approximates their actual share of participation in that specific task. Not all workers are employees in the study firms. In many instances, respondents refused to provide information on labour and also permission to interact with them in the factory. Hence, interviews could only be conducted either at

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2 A common refrain was that they are temporary workers and they would not know many details. Moreover, in 23 cases, respondents refused to answer certain questions on labour. A major factor was the issue of child labour, which has been raised by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international organisations like the UNICEF. This has created a lot of domestic pressure in the importing countries, forcing buyers not to import from firms that employ child labour. In fact, this has forced a few direct exporters to remove child labour in their finishing units. Nevertheless, child labour is found in all sub-contracting units and in many direct exporter firms as well. Hence, exporters and sub-contractors are generally wary of providing information pertaining to labour. In fact, even officials from the Inspectorate of Factories refused to provide secondary data when we approached them. Only, letters from the Joint Commissioner of Labour, Tamil Nadu, helped us to get the required data. After we had copied the data, officials insisted on inspecting what we had copied. Obviously, officials deliberately overlook use of child labour in these units.
home or outside the factory premises after work. When we visited their houses, we interviewed more workers in the neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods have their similarities and contrasts. People residing in an area tend to opt for similar kind of work. Either they predominantly work in the same sector/industry or work in the same set of firms. Women tend to work closer home in most cases. In fact, they settle for such jobs that are less paying as compared to the same work done in firms within the town, despite being aware of this discrepancy in wage levels. The time taken to travel to and from work seems to be a major impediment to their seeking employment in better-paying establishments. Quite often, they come home for lunch, cook for the evening and then return to work. Especially in the case of women with children, the need to be closer home and visit often seems to be a prime factor in their choice of place of work. The same can be said of child workers in the family. Men travel farther and seek work in establishments that tend to pay more than the ones closer home. These trends themselves, therefore, enforce a degree of labour segmentation. To understand this process better, we move to the site of the factory to examine the modes of labour sourcing and use.

B. Modes of Labour Sourcing and Use

a) Mode of Recruitment

Though a few big firms recruit through advertisements in newspapers for skilled, specialist jobs like pattern masters, artists, dyeing masters and merchandisers, by and large, recruitment is done informally through word of mouth or display of signboards outside the factories in Tiruppur. Such an informal mode of recruitment works, given the spatial proximity of work and residential spaces and also by the way in which their residential space is organised.

Workers tend to live in villages or in the slums in and around Tiruppur town. Members of a neighbourhood or a slum work predominantly in the same set of firms in the knitwear industry or in the same sectors. This is conditioned not only by the traditional sources of livelihood of the region, but also by location of new industries in that area. Thus, in many villages where traditional handloom weaving is the dominant sector, a sizeable section of
the population continues to work in this sector. In many households, members alternate between working in the knitwear industry and undertaking handloom work in households, with help from other family members. Similarly, in villages where powerloom units predominate, most members tend to work in powerloom units despite lower wages in this industry. Apart from the advantage of nearness, there seems to be an element of path dependence as well in the members' choice of sector for work. In villages closer to Avinashi, rice mills are the dominant employers. Interestingly, a similar dimension is observed even within the slums in Tiruppur. KVR Nagar, a prominent slum in the town, and its neighbourhoods consist mostly of migrants from Madurai. Large sections of them are employed in screen-printing units in the region. Similar 'locking-in' can also be observed in the label-making sector. The dominance of the Kaikolars, a traditional weaving community in label-making has already been mentioned. Villages populated by this community specialise in label-making, which is the biggest employer in these villages.

Similarly, knitwear workers living in a particular area tend to work in the same set of firms. The choice is guided by distance, nativity of the entrepreneur and familiarity with labour contractors. The establishment of newer factories on the outskirts of the town and in the nearby villages have also aided this process. If there are fairly big knitwear factories in a village area, most workers in these units are drawn from the same region. Hence, whenever demand for a particular job comes up, information is spread through word of mouth. Most worker respondents state that they obtained their current job when their relatives or neighbours who are already employed were sent by their employer to fetch additional workers. Only when work is not available do they feel the need to go out farther to search for work. Thus, the clustering of residential space enables capital to acquire labour power as and when required at lower search costs. Consequently, 'casualisation' becomes an effective means to reduce wage costs, as the search costs of identifying and recruiting workers are considerably reduced. Respondents say that it is common for employers to send one or two persons to their village or slum whenever they need additional labour.

Recruitment could be direct, i.e., workers are employed directly by the owners of firms. This is normally done through display of signboards at the factory gate or at key places in
the town or the villages. Workers, on seeing the signboards, come to the factory for work; or else, especially in factories in villages, worker supervisors come to the streets or cheris, where potential workers reside, informing them of availability of work. Sometimes, recruitment is ‘indirect’ i.e., labour contractors, hired by the owners, recruit workers. The type of recruitment varies largely according to the nature of jobs, though differences could be observed across firms for similar jobs. This distinction is crucial to understand the important role played by the mode of recruitment in exercising control over labour. Clear patterns can be discerned in the mode of recruitment as data presented in Table 5.3 shows.

Table 5.3
Mode of Recruitment among Sample Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Finishing</th>
<th>Fabrication</th>
<th>Dyeing</th>
<th>Printing</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Approach</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Contractor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other means</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork undertaken during 1997.

The first observation to be made is the prevalence of indirect recruitment in the finishing units alone. Even within finishing, it can be seen that recruitment through labour contractors is confined to workers involved in stitching, though there are a few exceptions. 80 per cent of the study firms make use of labour contractors to recruit tailors. Interestingly, the remaining firms, i.e., firms that recruit directly, are all established direct exporters.

Separate contractors are hired for stitching at the power table and for ‘chainlock’ tailors who, in local parlance, are referred to as ‘Singer’ tailors.³ The use of separate contractors is due to differences in the nature of their labour requirements. Power table labour contractors are erstwhile tailors in the knitwear industry who have access to a group of

³'Singer' is the brand name of one of the biggest producers of the chainlock machines and hence the name.
tailors that has earlier worked along with them or which hail from the same village or neighbourhood under their control. They enter into a contract with the employers and are responsible for completing the entire stitching for which the contract has been made. ‘Singer’ tailors are regular tailors employed in tailoring shops. They are migrants in most cases and come from various parts of Tamil Nadu. During off-season, a section of them go back to their respective places where they work as regular tailors.

‘Singer tailors’ or chainlock tailors, by virtue of their nature of work, cannot find continuous employment in the same firm. Their stitching is not required for all orders that are processed by a finishing firm. However, when their work becomes essential, demands on their labour power are high. The problem of having to recruit individual tailors, each time a firm gets an order that needs their stitching, is overcome by recourse to a ‘Singer’ contractor who brings in the workers en masse. Often, these tailors have to move to other firms for work once a particular order is completed. In the course of our fieldwork, we found that only one firm, one of the biggest manufacturer exporters, recruited them directly and employed them on a regular basis.

Demand for their labour does not coincide with the demand for power table tailors. Hence, the latter are recruited through separate contractors. Power table tailors are unique to knitwear and learn their skills only within the finishing unit. As discussed in the section on the demographic profile of workers, they are mostly ‘locals’. Women workers too form a significant section of them, whereas ‘Singer’ tailors are mostly men from other regions. To understand the significance of use of labour contractors in stitching, it is essential to analyse the labour process in greater detail.

As stated earlier, stitching is the most labour-intensive of all knitwear operations and constitutes nearly 4/5ths of the total labour costs required for the manufacture of a regular garment. Being the most important operation, control over the pace and quality of stitching is an important factor in ensuring competitiveness. Further, whereas the pace of other crucial jobs is conditioned by the pace of the machinery used, control over the pace of stitching continues to be retained by the worker, which imposes the need for capital to

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4 They are all male.

5 Singer tailors, since they often move around the town in search of jobs, are ridiculed by other workers for the impermanent nature of their jobs.
monitor it more closely. Apart from saving the owners the search costs involved in recruiting individual tailors, this mode also enables them to exercise control over the work process without direct supervision.

Our firm studies confirm this observation. "Cutting is not difficult and I need to employ just two to three cutters for most jobs. Checking women are numerous, but women are responsible and do not waste time. They do their job and leave. Helpers generally work with the tailors and once the tailors start working, they also have to work. Ironing and packing can be done quickly and sometimes even the cutters take up packing. And you don't need more than one or two persons for this. Thus, once I have the power table under control, other things are automatically taken care of" (Owner KK, interview conducted by the author in Tiruppur, 14/12/1995).

Problems associated with wage negotiation are passed onto the labour contractors. "I offer a rate to the contractor. It is up to the contractor to bring the workers and get the work done on time" (Owner KK, interview). Further, there is a perception, probably due to past experiences, that trade unions may get involved in wage negotiations, which may, then, pose problems for the owners. "At times the workers may approach the unions to get more wages or bonus. If you hire them through a labour contractor, then we do not have to worry about such issues" (ibid.). Since tailors in power table units are mostly locals, it is possible that they are more likely to approach trade unions, as compared to migrants or women. On the obverse, 70 per cent of the tailors studied prefer direct recruitment to recruitment through labour contractors as the latter mode implies lesser wage rates, due to the contractor's commission. The rest of the workers find that work with labour contractors reduces their search costs of finding employment. Although they would earn less per order, it saves them a lot of effort.

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6 In fact, even now, stitching in Tiruppur is considered to be inferior to that in competing nations like Bangladesh and China. Many firms export knit fabric to Bangladesh where it is stitched for exports.

7 Those who feel otherwise opine that working for a labour contractor ensures them more work, as otherwise their individual reach is limited. It needs to be mentioned that these are tailors working in smaller firms that are often beset by lack of orders and hence no work. The choice also depends on the quality of the labour contractor. If the latter has well-developed contacts with exporters or sub-contractors, he would ensure individual tailors steady work.
The use of contractors is more prevalent with the cluster moving into export production. Four study firms that recruited tailors directly have shifted to the use of contractors within the last decade. They cite growth in size and seasonality in demand to be major factors influencing this move. Increase in output has made essential the need for a bigger workforce, when compared to the earlier domestic market production. "Consequently, while earlier I needed only 10 tailors in 1983, at present, I have over 40 of them working with me. The power table contractor is an old employee of mine and gets me any number of tailors when I need them" (Owner, CKM, interview by the author, 18/6/1996). Interestingly, all the local firms studied recruit tailors directly. Hence, the shift to the export market has definitely influenced the mode of recruitment in the finishing units. Among producers for the export market, direct recruitment of tailors is undertaken solely by the bigger direct exporters. Their ability to offer continuous employment elicits cooperation of the workers though they do employ a supervisor to monitor the work.

The smallest finishing unit with a six-seat power table would employ six tailors, one cutter, six helpers, two iron men, two packers and labellers and three to four checking women, apart from Singer tailors as and when required. Thus, next to stitching, the jobs that employ the most number of workers are 'checking' and 'helping' which are done exclusively by women and children respectively. All respondents of the study firms opine that women are less 'troublesome' and 'work conscious' and do not require stringent supervision. Child helpers, trimmers and folders need no direct supervision, as the pace set by the tailors conditions their pace of work. Hence, the other workers in the stitching units are recruited directly.

The migrant labour force employed in the staging firms is also recruited directly. The fact that the migrants are relatively passive and tend to comply with high work intensity requirements renders them more amenable to direct recruitment as compared to 'local' labour. That employing 'outsiders' is considered highly desirable for capital in this segment of the industry was confirmed time and again during the fieldwork, when owner respondents often contrasted the 'dutiful' nature of migrants as opposed to the trouble-

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8 However, here again, a few instances are found in dyeing and bleaching where the owners contract out their processing facilities to a contractor who would pay the owner a commission for each case processed.
mongering ‘locals’. “They come to Tiruppur because they don’t have any means to survive. They do whatever is asked of them. They don’t demand anything and do not bring in wage negotiations” (Owner, KPR, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 19/4/1995). The administrative staffs in both the finishing and staging firms are however recruited directly. Thus, the perceived degree of docility and compliance, in congruence with flexibility in quantity of labour required, appears to influence the mode of recruitment apart from the nature of their labour requirement. Interestingly, we observe that while non-local capital is not too welcome by local capital, migrant labourers are seen to contribute positively to the growth of the industry.

b) Mode of Employment

Apart from administrative personnel, employment of the workforce is entirely casual in nature. All but three study firms employ only casual workers. All workers studied are casual workers, with 43 per cent of them having worked for more than one firm within the year preceding fieldwork (Table 5.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of firms</th>
<th>No. of workers</th>
<th>In per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>57.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork undertaken during 1997.

The District Industries Centre, registration with which is voluntary, but essential to get governmental concessions and loans meant for the small firms, lists more than 5000 units in Tiruppur for the year 1996. However, none of these firms list more than 9 employees on their payrolls. Invariably it ranges between 5 and 9 employees who happen to be administrative staff associated with documentation, accounting and merchandising work (Official, District Industries Centre, interview by the author in Coimbatore, 13/5/1997).

The direct recruitment of workers in the dyeing and bleaching units is in contrast with recruitment patterns in Surat where workers predominantly work for contractors (Bremen 1996, 100).
Thus, many units that employ even 60 or more workers during peak season fall outside the purview of factory legislation as they list only the administrative staff as employees.¹⁰

The advantages of a casual workforce range from the ready availability of a 'flexible' workforce to lowering of labour costs through avoiding payment of benefits linked to permanent employment. Casualisation of the work force did not begin with Tiruppur's export orientation and was extant even in the early 1970s. However, informants with long association with the industry, confirm the acceleration of this process since the beginning of the export phase. The high seasonality in market demand renders the option of a permanent work force highly cost-inefficient. Differences in peak and off-season employment reaches close to 100 per cent in many of the firms studied. Since the off-season period ranges from three to six months, the wage costs of a permanent workforce becomes large in relation to the total annual turnover. Fifteen of the sub-contracting units studied employ no workers for three to four months every year. They employ only half the peak season workforce for another three months. Given a squeeze in profit margins since the early 1990s, respondents from these firms state that they cannot afford to pay workers when they do not have any orders on hand. Less established direct exporters too cite similar constraints.

"In the export market, it is impossible to have a permanent workforce. Work is available only for six to eight months a year. How can you pay when you don't have orders? And on many occasions, once when an order is over, we have to wait for a week or two before the next order comes along. The workers too don't want to stay with us permanently. They go to other units for work and then come again when we have work." (Owner, AK, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 6/5/1996) Respondents in 80 per cent of the study firms agreed upon the importance of numerical flexibility in the reduction of production costs. Another advantage of a casual workforce stems from the demand for different jobs for different orders. 'Singer' tailors are required only for certain orders. Similarly, few

¹⁰ The Assistant Inspector of Factories, Tiruppur, says that it is extremely difficult to correctly enumerate the factories in Tiruppur. "They keep two doors opening on to two roads. So they have two addresses and hence two factories registered when there is actually one. Though we might find more than 10 workers employed there, since they are registered as two factories we cannot include them in our list. Even when we do, they would give a list of employee names different from the ones working there. So when the workers demand certain benefits like PF or ESI, they would find that they are not even on the payrolls. But it is also a problem with the workers. They do not want to stick to a single unit for a long period of time". (Interview by the author in Tiruppur, 18/1/2000).
orders need pikoding and drimming operations. The cost of employing such workers on a permanent basis is high given their inability to use their labour power on a regular basis. Further, consequent to the casualisation process, the employers are also not bound legally by the Factories Act and hence, need not provide welfare provisions like ESI, Provident Fund and gratuity payments.

This kind of quantitative adjustments of the labour force has also been aided by a captive local labour market where workers have few employment alternatives outside the knitwear industry and hence are forced to come back to work in this industry. Agricultural employment is more precarious and powerloom work is less paying and not as widely available as work in the knitwear industry. This lack of avenues for other employment saves capital the search costs involved in recruiting additional labour every year during peak season. Another factor that aids this process is the strong presence of a temporary migrant workforce willing to take up other means of employment during low demand period in Tiruppur.

Though quite a few owner respondents felt that workers too prefer casual employment, our interview with the workers provides a contrasting picture. Most workers interviewed prefer to work on a permanent basis in a single firm. The remaining workers who felt otherwise are women workers who find this arrangement advantageous as compared to regular, permanent work. To them, not having to report to work regularly on time is convenient, as they need to allocate time to household work as well. A checking woman has this to say, "I have to take care of my new-born kid, apart from cooking for my husband and first son. I can only go to work when I finish all these tasks. Whenever drinking water comes, I have to come home, fill up buckets and then go. For women like me, this work is convenient" (Selvi, Checking woman, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 15/6/1997). Other women, who straddle work within the household with employment in the knitwear factories, too express similar preferences. Migrant workers too find this arrangement convenient, as they would like to go home every year. As for the rest of the sample workers, security of employment is of prime concern and they prefer predictable work, and better and regular wages, along with the attendant benefits of permanent employment.
In the 1970s and early 1980s, though employment was casual and temporary in a legalistic sense, there was a sense of permanence, as workers continued to work throughout the year in a specific firm, which led to development of informal relationships with employees and between workers. Thus, it is possible to find workers employed in the same firm for many years. This continues to be true at present in the 'local' firms. Workers employed in all the firms studied in this category have worked in the same firm for over two years. In export firms, with the growth of seasonal employment, opportunities for developing such personal links with fellow workers and firm owners have diminished. As could be seen in Table 5.4, half the workers studied are found to work for at least two firms per season in the smaller finishing firms that predominate Tiruppur.

The bigger firms, the established direct exporters, by virtue of managing sustained production throughout the year, hold onto a 'core' set of workers. The same can be said of the bigger dyeing and bleaching, printing and calendering units. However, such continuous employment is accessible to only a small section of the workforce unlike the earlier phases. A few big direct exporters do have a 'permanent' labour force by virtue of their ability to offer continuous employment throughout the year. These are firms that have a more diversified product base and even cater to winter demand and more regular demand for synthetic and woollen wear. The excess demand during peak season is met by passing on additional orders to sub-contractors. Being 'permanent' entitles the workers in these units to Provident Fund and ESI benefits, and, above all, a security of employment denied to most workers in the industry.

The presence of such a small 'core' labour market amidst a huge 'peripheral' labour market recalls the dualistic labour market models of Piore and Berger (1980). While the latter, formulated in the context of Fordist mass markets, views the primary labour market to be the dominant one, in the case of Tiruppur, we observe that the 'secondary' market characterised by insecure employment and income, constitutes the major market for labour. Flexible employment practices do aid capital in Tiruppur to competitively cater to a highly seasonal and flexible product market.
c) Mode of Payment

The mode of payment is critical in exercising control over the labour process. The piece-rate system is conventionally viewed as a strategy of capital to elicit more labour power from the workers without supervision or coercion. The shift to the time-rate system is therefore seen as testimony to labour's ability to wrest their due from capital to an extent, as workers in this system have greater control over the pace of work. Table 5.5 details the mode of payment across various categories of workers.

Table 5.5
Mode of Wage Payment across Job Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time-rated jobs</th>
<th>Piece-rated jobs</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Checking</td>
<td>Cone-winding</td>
<td>Calendering machine operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping</td>
<td>Singer Tailor</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ironing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Button fixing/holing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knitting machine tending</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cutting master/pattern master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyeing Master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring Fixing/Trimming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boiler operator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dryer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork undertaken during 1997.

In the finishing units, the piece-rate system is evident among tailors, cutters and iron men, while the rest have time-rated wages and paid on a per shift basis. While most export firms have time-rate payment for stitching, a few of them and all the local firms studied paid tailors piece-rate wages. Though both types of wage payment can be observed for workers in the staging firms, the mode is by and large time-rated. This data, however, provides a static picture of the mode of payment and does not depict changes that have taken place over time. This inadequacy has been taken care of by an analysis of work histories of workers drawn from the above list. It is found that apart from distinct trends
in the mode of wage payment, there are fluctuations from time to time even within the same firm depending upon the nature of orders processed.

In the case of Tiruppur, the piece-rated system not only ensures better compliance from the workers, but has also helped cater to orders with faster turnaround periods. However, of late, with greater emphasis on quality, the use of time-rate wages has set in. At present, wages are time-rated in most jobs in the export units. Local units, however, continue to have piece-rated wages in stitching. This observation needs to be understood in relation to the history of wage payment in the industry. Before the 1970s, wages were mostly paid on a time-rate basis. Since the fragmentation process and the subsequent orientation towards the export market, there was a shift from time-rated to piece-rated wage payment. This was successful in the initial phase of exports when quality requirements were low and the output market was confined to basic T-shirts. Since then, with the movement to a more quality-conscious segment, there has been a movement back to time-rated wages. This is however not to imply a reversal back to the old system. It needs to be viewed along with the increasing use of casual labour and use of labour contractors.

First, the movement to the time-rate system is not due to any pressure from the workers and was warranted solely by changes in output market requirements. If quality of stitching had to be maintained, the use of the piece-rate system would not do, for it was inefficient. Second, since there is a wide range of garments to be produced, under a piece-rate system, wage negotiations need to take place for each order as it happens in the case of cutting masters. Third, the mode of payment operates in conjunction with mode of recruitment and employment, in order to retain control over the pace of work of the tailors. When recruited through labour contractors, the quantum and mode of payment are settled through the labour contractor. The labour contractor is paid a fixed amount for the completion of the order and in turn fixes the mode of payment. Any delay would imply a cut in the commission paid to the contractor. Thus, irrespective of the mode of wage payment, the required labour power can be extracted by virtue of control over the labour contractor. The onus is on the labour contractor to get the work completed on time without defects. Apart from leading to a cut in the labour contractor's margins, defects would also result in a future refusal of orders to the contractor. Thus, the use of time-rate
system along with the use of the contractors enables capital to elicit the required labour power at lower costs of supervision. Further, employment is entirely casual in nature. Therefore, once a particular order is completed, the owner need not pay wages to the workers until they recruit them again for the next order.

Singer tailors continue to be paid piece-rated wages, except in large exporting firms where they are employed on a permanent basis. However, none of the Singer tailors studied enjoy time-rate wages. As explained in an earlier section, the irregular need for their skills seems to be a factor that influences wage decisions. The workers studied in this category too prefer the piece-rate system, as they would like to maximise their wages, and earn as quickly as possible, given the irregular requirements of their skills.\(^\text{11}\) Two of the cutters studied report time-rated wages unlike the rest. Tailors employed in a few sub-contracting units are also paid on a piece-rate basis. Such units are located on the outskirts of the town and take advantage of a near-captive labour market from the nearby villages. According to one worker-respondent with trade union affiliation, another reason for the use of time-rate system, without fear of reduction in work intensity, is the increasing entry of women into stitching (Kumar AITUC worker, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 23/6/1997).

Processes in the staging firms are less amenable to being piece-rated, though in recent years a few staging firms have moved to use of the piece-rate system. Workers here are mostly paid on a time-rate basis, except in operations that involve stitching, like button-holing and fixing, collar fixing, drimming or pikoding. Nevertheless, a few cases are found where even workers in dyeing and calendering units are paid on a piece-rate basis. According to a worker-respondent in a calendering unit, five years ago, all calendering units paid on a time rate basis, but, at present, a few of them, including the unit in which he works, have reverted to piece-rate payment, where they are paid on a case by case basis.

The finishing firms catering to the domestic market use both types of payment. Among the workers in 'local' finishing firms studied, except two tailors, wages of all workers are

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11 It needs to be remembered that employment preferences are revealed only in the backdrop of insecure employment conditions. In general, workers prefer regular, continuous work to insecure work, even if the wage rates are lower.
time-rated. Here again, the nature of the product market conditions the payment mode. In local firms catering to the high end of the market, time-rate is widely prevalent. On the other hand, in firms that manufacture inner wear and cheap outerwear, payment is piece-rated in the stitching section. Interestingly, all workers interviewed in 'local' units preferred working for time-rate in these firms as opposed to the export units. Stability and security of income are cited as the factors responsible. In fact, three of them had taken up work in export units before settling for employment in 'local' firms. According to one of them, a trade union official, “In exports, you are either completely at work with no time for your family (peak season), or you are anxious to find work (off-season). It doesn’t give you any peace of mind” (Kumar AITUC, interview).

The ability of capital to extract the required labour power without recourse to the piece-rate system may also be indicative of compliance of workers to the needs of capital. This compliance may be due to their weaker position in the labour market. Migrant workers, for instance, stay on the premises of the dyeing and bleaching units, offering themselves for work throughout the day. Here, the time-rate system could also be indicative of the complete subservience of labour to capital, rather than a more benevolent system of wage payment, as is normally treated in labour process literature. The above discussion points to the overarching influence of output market conditions in setting the mode of payment. Explanations for the mode of wage payment have to therefore be sought not only in the capital-labour relation at the work place, but also in its relation to product market conditions.

**d) Work Hours and Conditions**

Long and intense work hours, accompanied by uncertainty in duration of employment, have been the most discernible feature of recent trends in the labour market. The stable demand conditions of the domestic market have enabled firms to work for regular, uninterrupted hours, over the year. On the other hand, high seasonality of demand, year-to-year fluctuations and fast turnaround periods have forced firms to use flexible work hours, marked by alternate periods of high work intensity and unemployment. The following table (Table 5.6) provides information on the period of unemployment during the year prior to the year of fieldwork.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of unemployment in months</th>
<th>No. of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The previous year was devoid of any distinct crises and data would indicate the duration of unemployment for the workers in a normal year. Apart from workers in big export firms and 'local' firms who have year-long employment, duration of employment in the knitting industry varies from five to nine months in a year. This excludes the days of unemployment during peak season, when they move from one firm to the other after the completion of an order or wait for the same firm to take up the next order. This observation, in fact, excludes the temporary migrant labour force that is employed for not more than six months in a year.

In export-oriented firms, apart from the seasonal variations in intensity of employment, wide variations in duration of work are found, even during the peak season. All workers admit to the increasing work intensity with the orientation towards an export market. This is especially true when they are forced to stick to rigid delivery schedules. Normally during the peak season, workers work for a period of 12 hours every day (11/2 shifts). On days preceding the delivery date, they tend to work throughout the day and night, with a short break the next morning, only to get back to work the same afternoon. On such occasions, which are not infrequent, it is common to find workers coming out of factories after putting in 36 hours of continuous work. This is true especially of tailors and their child helpers due to the greater demands placed on their labour power in processing a garment. Other workers in the finishing units are not subject to such long work hours as often as the tailors and the helpers.
Women workers work for not more than 16 hours in most cases. In fact, only women tailors work longer hours. Checking women work no more than 12 hours even during the peak season. The same is true of women in printing units. This is not only due to the nature of their work, but also has to do with the demands of household work on their labour time, as well as due to values that restrict women from working late away from home. This reduces the quantum of wages earned by them during a specific period vis-à-vis the male workers in similar jobs. Migrant workers however, tend to work longer. In the dyeing and bleaching firms, work is done on a 12-hour shift basis. Most workers reside on the firm’s premises and tend to work for two shifts at a stretch during peak season. However, the number of days of such long work hours is fewer as compared to the finishing units.

In the smaller firms, once the orders are completed with no other orders at hand, the workers are forced to move to other firms to seek employment. During the peak season, the search time is short, at the most a week. During off-season however, whereas the temporary migrant workers revert back to agricultural labour, the rest are unemployed. Quite a few of them travel around Tiruppur on bicycles to search for work in the knitwear industry. In fact, at the time of the second phase of fieldwork, most workers interviewed had been without jobs for the previous month or so. Unemployment periods, as seen in Table 5.6, run up to three to four months during a normal year for most workers.

Firms producing for the domestic market tend to work regular hours throughout the year. Workers employed in big export firms too are protected from these bouts of unemployment, though they too work for lesser hours during the off-season. In fact, workers employed in direct exporter firms face relatively less unemployment. There is a gradation of work availability from full year employment in the 20 odd big direct export firms to 9 to 10 months’ employment in the other direct export firms and 6 to 8 months of work in the sub-contractor firms. As a result, workers prefer working in the direct exporter firms. Thus, once again, it is possible to distinguish two distinct segments of the work force. One, a minority core segment employed in the big export firms who enjoy regular work and security of income, as opposed to the rest of the workforce who do not enjoy these privileges. Movement from the latter into the former segment is currently restricted by the limited availability of jobs, as there are few direct export firms that offer
such employment. Thus, uncertainty and seasonality of the product market reinforces the segmentation of the labour market.

In conclusion, work hours have definitely become flexible with the movement to ‘flexible’ product markets. The compliance of the workforce to such high work intensity is largely due to the seasonal and uncertain nature of employment, forcing them to earn as much as they can when employment is available. Though the work intensity in the staging firms is probably not as high as the finishing units, working continuously for 24 hours is common to many of these firms during the peak season. In dyeing and bleaching units, which employ the largest proportion of the workforce among the staging units, the migrant workers stay within the firms’ premises, as they are large enough to accommodate them. This works to the advantage of capital in many ways. Workers, though they supposedly work on a shift basis, tend to be captive labour, as they have to work as and when the owners require, on account of their residence within the factory premises. The other sections, viz., the local Dalit workers too tend to comply with the owners’ needs due to their vulnerable caste location in relation to the owners. Many owner respondents concur that it is not possible to find workers amenable to such ‘flexible’ work hours in other areas, and confirm its importance to cater to flexible output markets.

Apart from the long work hours to which even children are subject, the conditions at work are far from satisfactory. The cotton dust that permeates the town, especially in the knitting and finishing units, are found to cause lung-related ailments. In fact, a few workers studied state that they are given jaggery\(^{12}\) and raw rice to be eaten at regular intervals, which is believed to alleviate any such illness. Most work in the finishing unit involves either continuous standing or continuous bending over machines. Women engaged in checking report swelling of joints and knees due to continuous standing. Child workers fainting due to fatigue during night shifts are reported by a few workers from finishing units. Similarly giddiness, nausea and indigestion are regular complaints of the workers studied. More hazardous is the work involved in processing of fabric, especially bleaching and dyeing. Workers in these units work with a lot of chemicals, resulting in

\(^{12}\) Unrefined cane sugar.
skin diseases. Though the trade unions have demanded use of gloves during work with these chemicals, none of the workers report any knowledge of its use. Such hazardous work conditions in addition to the lower wages possibly prevent the 'locals' from seeking employment in such units. However, to the majority of the migrant labourers, a perceived choice between hazardous work and lack of any work forces them into such demeaning work.

e) Wage Rates and Secondary Terms of Employment

Wage rates, the quantum of surplus accruing to capital, as also the nature of reproduction of labour power, essential for any sustained accumulation strategy, crucially influence the cost competitiveness in the product market. In case of the finishing units, the importance of wage cost to the total cost of production is evident, given the dominance of stitching. Cutting to packing is a highly labour-intensive process and wages account for almost the entire working capital requirements, barring thread required for stitching and packing materials. In nominal terms, wage rates in Tiruppur have increased during the 1990s. Average wage rates for all jobs in the finishing units have increased (Bhattacharya 1999, 137). The same is true of jobs in the staging units though the initial wages and the proportion of increase have been relatively less (ibid.).

To begin with, let us consider the prevailing wage rates across various jobs. This cross-sectional depiction in Table 5.7 indicates distinct wage differences across job types. We construct a hierarchy of jobs in the knitting industry based on average nominal wage rates calculated from the information provided by the workers studied.

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13 Workers who work in dyeing and bleaching factories for a long time are found to have a scaly skin below the elbows due to contact with dyes.
14 Interestingly, even in the 1940s, when workers in the 'Madura Knitting Company' in Madurai had gone on strike, one of the demands placed by them was to provide gloves to workers in the bleaching section (GO. 2023, Devpt. Dt 15/8/1939, 33-34, 54).
15 By secondary terms of employment, we refer to the benefits that workers are eligible for, apart from their wages.
16 The administrative staff is excluded from this exercise.
### Table 5.7
Job Classification Based on Average Nominal Wage Rate in 1996-97 Among Sample Workers (In Rs. per shift 9 AM to 5.30PM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wage rate in Rs.</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40-49</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-69</th>
<th>70-79</th>
<th>&gt;80</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job type</td>
<td>Helper in Conewinding</td>
<td>Checking/Cone winding</td>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>Ironing</td>
<td>FL Tailor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimming</td>
<td>Helper in Dyeing</td>
<td>Folding</td>
<td>B/O</td>
<td>OL tailor</td>
<td>Singer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper in Calendering</td>
<td>Boiler Operator</td>
<td>Asst. Dyeing master</td>
<td>M/O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper in Printing</td>
<td>Labelling</td>
<td>Lab master</td>
<td>Fashion master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper in Embroidery</td>
<td>Button Fixing</td>
<td>Cutting master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Checking</td>
<td>CM/Pattern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Winch Operator</td>
<td>Fab M/O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ring Fixing/Trimming</td>
<td>Foreman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dyeing Master</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: B/O = Boiler operator, Fab = Fabrication, M/O = Machine Operator, OL = Overlock, CM = Cutting Master, FL = Flatlock.
Source: Fieldwork undertaken during 1997.

At the top of the hierarchy are the pattern masters in finishing units, dyeing masters in the bleaching and dyeing units, and fashion masters and machine foreman in the fabrication units. All these require a few years of 'on the job' training before they can acquire all the requisite skills. However, the wage rates indicated here relate to well-established workers. Workers with lesser years of work experience earn less than that indicated. These workers are in great demand and find permanent employment in big export firms and staging units. However, pattern masters working for the smaller firms move from one firm to the other. The same is true of fashion masters in the knitting firms. However, these are premium jobs in the industry and cannot to be compared to the casual and insecure work of the majority of other workers in the industry.
The next set of jobs in the hierarchy is that of cutting masters, machine operators in fabrication, power table and Singer tailors and ironmen. While the jobs discussed above are very few in number, with not more than one of them in a single firm, these jobs are more numerous. Here again, wage rates differ, based upon the amount of work experience. Inter-firm differences too persist. These differences can be explained by the firm's status in relation to the market, as also by their spatial proximity to the 'core' of knitwear activity in the town.

Workers in directly exporting units, especially the bigger firms, are generally paid more, when compared to the smaller direct exporters and the sub-contracting firms. This is especially true when workers are recruited directly whereby the commission enjoyed by the labour contractor is passed on to the workers. Second, wage rates are found to be lower, as we move to firms located outside Tiruppur. In recent years, there has been a gradual tendency for firms to move to the outskirts of Tiruppur municipality to take advantage of the lower rents and, in certain cases, avail of governmental concessions offered to 'backward areas'. Such firms have been able to source labour from the nearby villages at a lower rate, as lower transportation costs and land rents prove to be attractive to these workers. Further, since working on the outskirts means less travelling time, workers, especially women find this option attractive and even an incentive, since they prefer to take up work closer home. An illustrative case of this process is the case of a cutting master studied, employed in a firm in Avinashi, a town 15 kilometres away from Tiruppur. Earlier, he was employed in a firm in Tiruppur for Rs. 75.00 a shift. At the time of the interview, he earned only Rs. 65.00. However, he preferred work here as rents are lower and so are costs of transportation to work, for his family is based in Puliyampatti which is closer to Avinashi than Tiruppur (Prabhakar, Cutting master, interview by the author in Avinashi, 12/5/1997). The relative isolation of these firms from the main agglomeration also precludes a tendency towards equalisation of wages observed in Tiruppur town. Wage rates in these firms are lower by at least 10 per cent of the prevailing wages in Tiruppur town (Table 5.8).
Table 5.8
Comparative Wage Rates across Jobs in Tiruppur Urban Area and Urban Fringe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Type</th>
<th>Average Wage Rate (in Rs./shift)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stitching</td>
<td>75-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironing</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork undertaken during the period 1997.

While the wage rates of these ‘skilled’ jobs like cutting and stitching are high and compare well with that prevailing in formal sector employment, like work in the spinning mills, wages for jobs lower down the hierarchy are rather low. The same is true of wage rates prevailing in the staging firms. These jobs are the lowest in the hierarchy and numerous as well. Even then, wage rates in this set of jobs compare favourably with wage rates in other informal sectors, especially when we take the duration of employment into account. The table 5.9 depicts comparative wage rates for low skilled jobs in the region (Table 5.9).

Table 5.9
Wage Rate in Other Informal Sectors in Tiruppur in 1996-97

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Wage Rate (in Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>60-70/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>65-70/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerloom</td>
<td>50/shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handloom</td>
<td>40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brass vessel making</td>
<td>40-50/shift</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Since handloom weaving is typically a household enterprise undertaken by family labour, the amount given is approximate earnings in a day’s work.
Source: Fieldwork undertaken during 1997.

Jobs that offer work throughout the year are relatively less paying. Though agricultural and construction work have higher wages, preference for these jobs is offset by the low and uncertainty of work availability. Agricultural work in the region, for instance, is not
available for more than 5 months a year. Interestingly, even 'local firms' pay less for the same job as compared to export firms. Further, workers, even given equal income from agriculture and knitwear, prefer the knitwear industry as work is considered to be less tough (Workers from Avinashilingampalayam, interview by the author, 18/5/1997). It is interesting to note this perception when we take into account the longer work hours in the knitwear sector. Probably, perceptions as to what constitutes dignified work too influence workers' choices. Agricultural or construction work is undertaken mostly by Dalits. This marks such jobs to be lower forms of work. Whereas, going to work in factories, relatively 'well' dressed, working in an office-like space, gives the workers a perception of greater dignity. Even within the knitwear sector, work in the direct export units are considered superior to work elsewhere, given the higher wage rates and more regular work.

Workers who are employed in firms registered under the Factories Act 1948 are eligible for additional benefits like bonus, Dearness Allowance, Provident Fund, sick leave and vacation. Apart from bonus, the majority of the workers in the Tiruppur knitwear industry do not enjoy any of these benefits. Only in around 20 direct export firms, workers are provided with some of these privileges (Thangavelu, CITU leader, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 15/12/1999). A prime reason is the strong trade union affiliation of the workers in these units. Even here, weekly holidays are not given during peak season. As for the rest of the workers, paid leave is unheard of. Fifty per cent of the workers interviewed have not even heard of Provident Fund. This is in contrast to the earlier pre-export phase when ESI and PF were provided in most of the factories in Tiruppur. After a 4-month strike in 1984, trade unions did secure grant of dearness allowance, but its actual implementation has been tardy (Ilamparuthi, AITUC official, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 17/12/1999). Further, wage rates, apart from the 20 firms mentioned above, are lower compared to that negotiated by the trade unions. However, even at present, workers in 'local' firms catering to the 'middle' and 'high' end of the market enjoy these benefits.

Given these factors, it is very difficult to conclude that there has been any appreciable increase in real wages. While 20 per cent of the cutters and power table tailors say they enjoy a higher standard of living, the rest of the workers are of the opinion that though wage rates have increased, they have not matched the rising costs of living due to rapid
urbanisation. Bhattacharya (1999) too argues that in real terms, wage rates have almost stagnated over a period of 15 years in Tiruppur (137-139). Though nominal wage rates have appreciated, the highly seasonal and uncertain nature of employment severely limits the quantum of income earned over the year. Quite a few of the workers preferred the stable employment in domestic firms at lower wage rates to working in export units. Direct recruitment, regular employment and hence a degree of income security renders work in these units more desirable. However, 55 per cent of the workers did prefer work in direct export units to all other kinds of work. 35 per cent of them prefer work in 'local' firms that cater to the high end of the market. The rest are undecided, as they are not aware of work conditions in other sectors. The reasons cited however vary. Local workers, by and large, prefer work in local firms for the regular work hours and income security. Most migrant workers prefer work in the direct export firms when recruited directly. The reasons cited are higher wage rates, flexible work hours and regular work. Interestingly, work in the sub-contractor and job-work firms, which constitutes the biggest chunk of employment in the industry, is least preferred. Irregular work, long bouts of unemployment and lack of any secondary benefits are cited as the main factors.

That wage rates in most jobs in the industry constitute only secondary wages and not a 'living' wage is clear from the fact that these workers all hail from families in which other members too work in this industry. All migrant workers interviewed are of the opinion that they need to have at least two members of a household working in this industry at any point of time to survive. The same is true of local workers as well. This reveals an important facet of the nature of reproduction of labour power in Tiruppur.

C. Conditions of Reproduction

a) Household Income: Levels and Sources

Apart from wage rates earned by machinists in fabrication, cutters, tailors, iron-men, dyeing masters and print masters, the wages earned by the rest do not constitute a 'primary' wage. In other words, their wages are insufficient to sustain a household.

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17 By 'secondary' wage rates, we refer to wage rates insufficient to sustain a family. Primary or living wage rate refers to a family living wage that is considered essential to be paid to a male worker and that which ought to sustain his wife and two children (Kalpagam 1994, 23-24).
However, capital sustains their reproduction by cheapening their labour power by other means. First, the wages of women and children, who, along with migrant workers dominate this category, are used to supplement the family income. Invariably, households have a minimum of 2 members working in the knitwear industry or in local powerloom units or as agricultural labour. Table 5.10 gives the number of wage earners in the workers' families studied.

Table 5.10
No. Of Additional Members of Household Working in the Knitwear Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of workers</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>129</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork conducted during the period 1997.

As the table indicates, most workers interviewed have other members of the household involved in some job or the other. Of this, 80 per cent of the households have at least one member, including children employed in the knitwear industry. In fact, Vidhyasagar (1996) asserts that 60 per cent of the households would fall below the poverty line, if children are withdrawn from the labour force. This is further confirmed by the case studies of workers conducted.

Murugan is a migrant from a village near Palani who, at present, lives on rented premises in Thevampalayam, a traditional handloom village. He lives with his wife, father and three children. There are four more families from his village who stay in nearby houses. While, he is a Singe' tailor, his wife goes for checking and two children, a girl and a boy, work as helpers in a sub-contractor's firm. The third child is 4 years old and is taken care of by his father, the only other non-wage earning member. Murugan had been running a tea shop with the help of his wife in his village. Prior to that, he had spent a few months in a tailoring shop as an apprentice. The income became insufficient, especially after the birth of the second child. So, when the tailor with whom he had worked earlier, and who had migrated to Tiruppur, told him of the employment opportunities in Tiruppur, he
decided to go there. Within a week, he got a job. This job was arranged by an acquaintance in the slum who worked in the same factory. Soon he brought his family, after which, his wife and the first son took employment as checker and helper respectively. In another 4 years, the second child followed the first one to work.

According to him, they need at least Rs. 3000 per month for their family. "During peak season, I alone would earn that much. Between the four of us, we would earn even up to 6000 Rs. for a month or two. Then we would repay debts incurred during off-season, go home, and attend weddings or festivals, for all of which we need money. If my father or son falls sick, I need to buy them medicines. So we can save nothing during peak season and when we don't have enough work, we borrow again" (Murugan, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 8/6/1997).

Another phenomenon that compounds the problem of meagre income is the rampant alcoholism among workers. Women respondents were eloquent on this, when questioned about their need to work, despite relatively higher wage rates reported for their husbands/fathers. A regular reply was, "Men have their own expenses like drinking". During fieldwork, we could see long queues of men and children in front of liquor shops on Saturdays, the payday for the knitwear workers. In the case of large families, several family members need to enter wage-work, especially if the families comprise ailing older members. In such households, we find three or four members taking up work. Thus, in a sense, the knitwear production complex in Tiruppur as a whole makes use of family labour, enabling the payment of lower or secondary wages to individual members, especially women and children.

b) Housing

Housing poses an important problem for workers in the knitwear industry due to two reasons. One, large-scale immigration has increased the demand for residential space. A decadal population increase of over 40 per cent in the Tiruppur urban agglomeration (Sathiah 1994, 2) obviously warrants improvements in urban infrastructure, which has not been forthcoming. Second, since houses and factories compete for similar spaces, the expansion of production itself has placed further demands on urban space in Tiruppur. The decentralised nature of production organisation that makes little use of vertical space
accentuates this problem. House rent increases have been substantial and at present constitute a major expense for worker households. Though trade unions regularly demand provision of housing allowance, this practice is absent in Tiruppur. Ninety-two per cent of the workers studied live in one-room houses. Fifty per cent of the households of workers studied are thatched while the rest are tiled. One worker who has been staying in the same house for the past 10 years claims that he pays three times more than what he used to pay initially, while his wages have increased only twofold since then (Subramanian tailor, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 18/5/1997). The existing wage rates, according to the workers interviewed, are insufficient for them to rent better accommodation, especially given the fact that they do not have employment throughout the year.

Rents vary from Rs. 250 to Rs. 500 for these houses. The variation is less due to the size or number of rooms in the house and, in fact, is proportional to the distance of the houses from the centre of the town. Apart from slums within the municipality, workers also live in nearby villages. Access to drinking water supply is another important determinant. Water supply is erratic and in summer very scarce. Women wait in long queues to collect a few buckets of drinking water. Ground water, which is used for other purposes, is heavily polluted due to the seepage of effluents from the dyeing and printing factories, and has impurities beyond the permissible levels (Jacks, Kilhage and Magnasson 1994; Palanichamy and Palanisami 1994). Hence, they need to pay higher rent if they are to have an easy access to usable water.

Residents of nearby villages rent out a portion of their houses to migrant workers, thereby surmounting the problem of low income. Rents are lower in these villages and, as a result, large number of migrants has moved to these areas. The increasing rents have in fact systematically pushed workers farther and farther away from the town. Quite a few respondents have moved from houses within the town limits to these villages due to their inability to pay for the increase in rents. This phenomenon further facilitates movement of knitwear factories towards these regions. Though initially factories were set up in the outskirts to take advantage of governmental concessions to backward areas and lower land prices, the conversion of these regions into residential space for migrant workers has enabled these factories to draw from a local pool of labour supply. This is especially true
of women workers who prefer to work closer home for reasons stated earlier. Hence, even though wage rates are lower in these factories in relation to wages in the town, workers in these regions prefer work here, given the lower rents and hence probably leading to equal real incomes.

Another means by which reproduction costs are lowered can be observed in dyeing and bleaching units. Since most of these units are located in the outskirts of the town, travel to work everyday tends to be a time-consuming and a relatively costly proposition. To offset these costs, the owners of the dyeing units allow the workers to stay on the plant's premises and employ a cook to cater to all the workers. Most of these workers are male migrants who leave their families back home. To them, the advantages of staying on the firm's premises are many. First and most importantly, they need not pay any rent. Second, cost and time involved in travel to place of work is saved. Finally, the expenditure on food reduces, as they pay less here to the canteen compared to what they would if they were to stay elsewhere. This enables capital to sustain the workforce at lower wages. Further, it enjoys the advantage of a near-captive labour force available to work throughout the day. Work hours are less rigid and workers end up working whenever required throughout the day. Moreover, their social space is very restricted and interaction with other workers becomes near impossible. They do not see themselves as belonging to Tiruppur. To them, home beckons after six months and they see this work as only a means to carry back a portion of their income.

Comparatively, living conditions of non- *Dalit* 'local' workers are better, when compared to that of migrant workers. This is not only due to the their higher prevalence in well-paying jobs. The fact that many of them live in houses of their own enables them save on rent. There are differences in levels of household income as well. Since local child workers have been employed in this sector for a long period, many of them have moved on to become tailors. Further, many members of the household are employed in other sectors as well, thereby providing them with a broader base of income source. Hence, household incomes tend to be higher and relatively more regular. In a few households, children are sent to schools as well. Among migrant workers, evidence of such mobility and horizontal diversification is found only among the older migrants. The newer migrants, as is to be expected, live in worse conditions, faced with higher income
insecurity. Local Dalit workers face similar constraints, though we find a higher proportion of the household members employed in agriculture.

c) Access to Formal Education

All workers studied are poorly educated, though 90 per cent of them have attended school for at least a year. Workers who are from Tiruppur are relatively more educated, when compared to migrant workers. Only one, a dyeing master, had completed Bachelor's degree. Two lab technicians have completed diplomas in textile technology. One cutting master and three tailors (all locals) have completed their schooling but not entered college. 70 per cent of them have not gone beyond the primary stage (Table 5.11). Women constitute a greater section of the less educated, and account for 5 of the 6 workers who have not entered school. Dalits also form a larger share of the less educated.

Table 5.11
Educational Profile of Sample Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of years spent at school</th>
<th>No. of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork undertaken during the year 1997.

With the growth in employment opportunities for children, there has been a tendency for families to withdraw children from the schooling system. Vidhyasagar (1996) observes a decline in the enrolment rate in the region since the boom in employment in the knitwear industry. This, he attributes to the lure of greater family income, when income levels for the households are low. A case study would illustrate this better.

Muniyandi is a migrant from a village in Madurai district where he had a cycle repair shop that was not very remunerative. News about high employment prospects reached him through a relative who had come here earlier. Following him, his family consisting of his wife and two sons, reached Tiruppur in 1992. He had left his parents back in his village as they have a small house and his father continues to go for agricultural work.
The sons, aged 11 and 10 then, had been studying in the local school before coming to Tiruppur. On reaching Tiruppur, he got employed in a calendering unit while his wife took up work in a printing unit. While one son was sent to work as a helper in a finishing unit, the younger one continued to study in a nearby school.

The year 1995/96 was a crises period for the industry due to a sudden hike in hosiery yarn price. Exporters refused to take up orders until the prices became more stable. During that year, Muniyandi could work for only four months. They could not afford to send the second child to school as they had borrowed heavily from informal sources to tide over the period of unemployment. So they were forced to send the second son too for work. Though he could have joined school later, he did not want to, as there was a gap of a year. As the respondent puts it, "When I came here, I thought that I could send at least one child to college. But after working for a year, my second son did not want to go back to school. All his friends in this area go to work and he wants to be with them" (Muniyandi, Machine-operator in calendering firm, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 20/6/1997).

Thus, apart from economic compulsions, there is a prevailing culture of poverty that undermines the importance of children being sent to school. The social space in which workers live influences perceptions about childhood. Children in the worker-dominated neighbourhoods go to work early. Schooling is considered to be economically less useful, as even those who finish college face poor employment prospects within Tiruppur. Even after finishing college, students end up in white-collar jobs in the knitwear industry that are less paying, when compared to that of a tailor. This is an oft-cited defence for sending their children to work. 18 True, children in the nearby villages did undertake agricultural or construction work in the days before the increase in the employment prospects in the knitwear industry. But these specific perceptions about children being economically useful appear to be reinforced with the enhanced prospects of vertical mobility in this industry.

However, vertical mobility is not available to all workers in the industry. As we observed in Chapter 3, the ‘high paid’ jobs are invariably held by ‘local’, non-Dalit, adult male

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18 Accountants, documentation managers and other clerical staff were paid not more than Rs 2000 per month in 1997. Tailors in export firms earn more in a month and more importantly, tailoring jobs are aplenty as compared to these jobs.
workers and to some extent, by ‘local’ women workers. Conversely, migrant workers, children, most women workers and ‘local’ Dalit workers are relegated to the less paid or ‘unskilled’ jobs. To comprehend this acute segmentation of the labour market, corresponding to social stratification, we need to undertake a close examination of the skill acquisition process and the consequent vertical mobility it bestows upon specific segments of the labour force.

d) Mode of Skill Acquisition

An important constituent of reproduction of labour power is the mode of skill acquisition. Understanding of this process is crucial to an understanding of the reproduction of labour markets. As Peck points out, “Skill formation and its accompanying system of social regulation seems to be one of the decisive factors in determining whether economies take the high road or the low road” (1992, 328). The fact that all the study firms cite the availability of a skilled workforce to be a major competitive factor vests this aspect with added significance. Further, earlier studies on Tiruppur have highlighted the informal mode of skill acquisition and the consequent vertical mobility of labour (Swaminathan and Jeyaranjan 1994, 12).

Earlier, when the industry was characterised by a lesser division of labour and greater levels of vertical integration, workers tended to learn a number of other jobs than the one they specialised in. Thus, a cutting master would also know stitching and packing, whereas a tailor would not only help to cut or pack but even run a knitting machine when required. The formation of such a ‘multi-skilled’ labour force appears to have diminished with the greater division of labour and the spatial separation of different functions like knitting and stitching. Acquisition of specific skills, however, continues to be an informal process for the industry as a whole. Apart from jobs in dyeing and printing firms and in fabrication, where workers with formal technical qualifications have been employed in recent years, jobs in the knitwear industry need no formal educational qualification.

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19 Krishnaswamy (1989) discusses the ‘deskilling’ resulting due to greater division of labour.

20 It is of interest to observe that, there was no formal training institution in the Tiruppur region catering to the knitwear industry until an institute of fashion design was established in its outskirts in 1996.
For our purpose, we have classified jobs as 'skilled' or otherwise, depending on the period of on-the-job training or apprenticeship. Any job that requires less than a month to learn is categorised as 'unskilled'. We find a close correspondence between wage rates and 'skill intensity' of the job. The most skilled jobs are that of the pattern master in the finishing units, the dyeing and printing master in the staging firms and fabrication foreman in knitting. While pattern masters and machine foremen require cutting and machine operating skills, dyeing masters need a few years of experience in mixing of colours and understanding of optimal combination of dyes to get the required colour. Earlier discussions on vertical mobility have been based on the acquisition of cutting, stitching and machine tending skills and, hence, our analysis is confined predominantly to these skills. In this, to begin with, we confine ourselves to a study of skill formation in the finishing units, as it is these units that form the core activity in the industry.

Apart from the jobs mentioned above, the rest of the jobs in finishing firms are unskilled. The skill acquisition process is in fact, aided by the need for a substantial segment of such unskilled labour as well in this industry. Local workers and of late, migrants, enter the finishing units as child workers and take up unskilled work like folding, trimming and helping. These tasks, which were undertaken by tailors before, were split up into separate tasks to be carried out by child workers (Krishnaswamy 1989, 1355). These tasks essentially revolve around stitching and enable the tailors to stitch faster. Gradually, due to their spatial proximity to the tailors, the child workers tend to pick up stitching skills. Whenever the tailors take a break from work, the helpers try to learn to stitch using some waste cloth. The tailors too aid them in this process by teaching them to avoid faults. This of course requires subservience to the tailors, but the paternalist relationship between the child helper and the adult worker smoothens this process. This process continues for two years on an average, after which the child workers move to other firms either through contractors or directly, claiming experience in stitching and seeking jobs as tailors. Starting with low skill levels and hence low productivity, they tend to earn only slightly higher than 'unskilled' workers do. On the basis of the worker's speed, the contractor fixes

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21 To begin with, it has to be stated that most occupations in the knitwear industry in Tiruppur cannot be considered 'skilled' by normal standards. Scott, for instance, classifies only designing to be a skilled operation and delegates even machining/stitching to the category of 'unskilled' in the garment industry (Storper and Scott 1990, 575).
the amount to be paid to the new worker. Over a period, they become full-fledged machinists earning the standard wages for tailors. Thus, the extant piece-rate system too appears to have aided the process of skill formation in this sector. In the case of time-rate payment, initial wage rates are less as compared to that of a standard tailor after which it increases over time.

The other 'skilled' occupation is cutting. It is learnt largely through apprenticeship for a minimum of six months during which the 'apprentices' are not paid any wages. It is possible to learn cutting of basic shapes in a month's time or two. A wider repertoire, a definite requirement since the diversification of the product base, needs a minimum training period of four to six months (Kumar, Cutting master, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 22/6/1997). The need to use heavy scissors, and the spatial distance between the cutting and stitching sections, preclude the possibility of the child workers from learning to cut fabric. Hence, cutting is learnt by joining these firms as adult apprentices for a few months. Though a few of the study firms did claim to pay a sum of Rs. 25 to 30 per shift during the training period, none of the cutting masters studied confirmed this, since they were not paid any wages during their training period.

This, again, precludes migrant workers from learning this skill. Only households that could survive without the income of an adult for that period could afford to train one of its male members in cutting. In the staging firms, 'skilled' occupations are confined to only one per unit in most cases. For example, a dyeing unit needs only one dyeing master, a printing unit requires only one printing master or a single artist. The same is true of new staging firms too, which require only one machine attendant, as in the case of computerised embroidery or compacting units. Thus, though workers gain many years of experience, the possibility of using these skills as a means to get higher wages is limited. Further, the recent entry of technically qualified personnel into some of these occupations has further hindered the prospects for upward mobility of the regular migrant workers.

The entry of children as unskilled workers forecloses the possibility of adult migrant labour to gain entry into the finishing units. Adult migrant labourers move into Tiruppur with no skills that can be put to use in the knitwear industry, excepting stitching on

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22 Earlier, cutters would even be tailors who had learnt cutting while at work.
chainlock machines in the case of tailor migrants. Invariably, their previous occupations are restricted to agricultural labour and other informal activities like construction work, weaving or informal vending or similar services. Hence, their access to the skilled jobs is restricted. They do not take up unskilled work in the finishing units for the following reasons. One, the wages paid to children in the unskilled jobs in the finishing units are lower compared to what 'unskilled' labour fetches in the ancillary units. While a helper in the finishing unit earns on an average Rs. 30 per shift, at present, helpers in the ancillary unit earn a minimum of Rs. 40 to 45 per shift. Second, given the segmentation based on age, it is not considered 'proper' for adults to enter jobs that have historically been performed by children. Third, given the possibility of free housing and cheaper food in many staging firms, they prefer to get employed in these units. At times, even migrant families with children find it difficult to send them to the finishing units because of the distances involved in travelling.

Thus, capital as a whole perpetuates an informal process of skill acquisition without investment of any kind. During the earlier phase, when units were smaller and work intensity less, workers could easily learn more skills. Apart from stitching, they did undertake packing, label-fixing, checking etc., at various stages of the execution of an order. Thus, entrepreneurs who had moved up from the worker status are 'craft workers' who knew most operations in the finishing units. However, with the expansion of the industry, the division of labour has become greater and demarcation of jobs, clearer. Checking women cannot move into any other job and continue to work at the same task as long as they can. This was confirmed both by workers who have had considerable work experience and by owners who had been workers earlier. Further, the high intensity, seasonal nature of employment and movement from firm to firm to offset periodic unemployment have all led to diminishment of the 'enskilling process' of the workers cited in earlier studies. Few workers in our survey had knowledge of 'skilled' tasks other than their current occupation, and even among those who had more than one skill, only a small proportion had put them to use at work. This led us to an examination of the other feature of the labour market that is considered to be unique to Tiruppur, 'high vertical mobility'.

23 However, this has changed in a few direct export firms, which do not employ child labour. Here, adult women workers have replaced child workers.
e) Prospects for Mobility

Tiruppur’s labour market has been highlighted for the prevalence of high vertical mobility among the workers (Swaminathan and Jeyaranjan 1994, 12). Workers start out as unskilled child workers and move on to become capitalists, even direct exporters. Owners of four study firms had started out their careers as child workers in this industry in the 1960s and early 1970s. Beginning as helpers to tailors, they had moved up to become tailors, cutters and foremen before setting up units of their own. Further, 13 units in our study had former workers as part owners. To recapitulate, the dominant modes through which this phenomenon occurs are as follows. One, termed locally as ‘kashtakoottu’, is a process where workers enter into partnership with kin members, with access to capital, either by sale of land or trade or other sources. The second mode is, what has been termed, ‘gratis capital’, wherein former employers provide long-standing workers with second-hand machinery and orders to help them start units of their own. Third, termed as the ‘journeyman’ route, workers team up together, pool in their savings to set up units of their own.

Thus, with extensive kin networks, strong patronage of employers and low investment requirements, there are a continuum of positions in the industry which enabled a person starting out as an unskilled worker to end up owning a staging firm or a finishing unit or even as a direct exporter. This phenomenon appears to concur with a key feature of the ideal industrial district, viz., the social mobility of the working class. Viewed in a static sense, all the three modes would appear to be pervasive. However, a closer examination reveals a decline of the latter two modes over time. All the firms in our study, which had been started by workers in the 1990s, are all instances of ‘kashtakoottu’, with the workers teaming up with moneyed relatives who would meet the investment requirements or those owning landed property in addition to caste contacts. The other two modes were confined to firms that were started in the 1970s or 80s. To understand this shift, it is essential to comprehend changes in the production technology and structure since then.

Over the years, investment levels have increased. This can be attributed to both an increase in the minimum number of machines required and need for better quality machinery. The study reveals that a new, small firm, manufacturing to export, with a 6-
seat power table and a few singer machines requires an investment of around Rs. 2 lakhs. The initial investment requirements also depend on land prices, which have appreciated tremendously since the export boom has begun. The quick increase in demand for space has led to considerable hikes in land rents, which has squeezed into the surplus of smaller capitals. Further, with the reduction in profit margins due to severe competition, it is clear that in the future, ownership of factory space is essential to a firm's success. As a respondent from a case firm opined, “In the future, if anyone wants do exports in Tiruppur, they have to have their own land” (Supervisor, MLE, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 12/6/1996; owner PRE, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 20/12/1995).

On the other hand, units that were set up during the pre-1985 period had started out with very few machines, all of them locally manufactured. Knitting machinery was mostly second-hand, purchased from Ludhiana. Stitching machines too were bought from domestic manufacturers. This is in contrast to the firms that have come up during the export phase, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s. The need for imported machines, an outcome of the growing quality standards, has made a 6 seat imported power table a basic requirement for a finishing unit. The high initial capital requirements and the sharp hike in rents for factory space makes it very difficult for the workers to move onto become owners. Workers teaming up together to buy a few second-hand machines and start production seem to be a feature of the past.

Further the ties between the employer and the worker has become more impersonal over time. The use of contract labour, high seasonality of employment and the resultant high labour turnover undermine the possibility of any sustained worker-owner relationship, leading to patronage. Earlier, outside the caste networks, it was possible for workers who have known each other for a long time to come together, pool in their savings, buy a few second hand-machines and establish a manufacturing unit. Only to those with adequate landed property and caste contacts are such avenues open at present. Caste networks thus not only facilitate transactions and social mobility, but once again exclude those who are not a part of it.

Another important dimension that needs consideration is the changing gender/caste composition of the labour force. The large-scale use of female labour has led to
segmentation, thereby blocking out the prospects of vertical mobility. Though female child workers do end up as tailors, they do not take up other jobs, not only due to the need to combine household work with wage earning employment, but also due to prevailing perceptions about women and their work. Cutting is normally avoided as the use of scissors for long hours is considered to reduce their ability to handle domestic chores. Ironing continues to be the preserve of men as the job is seen to be ‘too heavy’ for women, even though recent introduction of steam iron makes ironing easier. Work in fabrication is avoided as it involves regular work in the nights. Further, mending of thread and minor adjustments can only be made by climbing up the machine. The use of sari as a dress prevents women from undertaking such tasks. Local women avoid work in the dyeing and printing units as well. Women cannot undertake handling of colours and dyes as it spills on to their clothes. Male workers tend to work bare-chested, with minimal clothes. Further, work in these units is considered inferior as it is seen to be tougher as compared to work in the finishing units. Migrant women, for want of better jobs, end up working in the printing units and, to a minor extent, in the dyeing factories as dryers. Gradually, though they get to move on to other jobs in the finishing units like checking or labelling or packing. Men continue to work in these units, as their job choices in the finishing units are limited.

In the finishing units, checking, packing and stitching are not viewed as ‘heavy’ jobs and women are mostly found in these jobs. Checking, especially, is widely perceived to be ‘apt’ for women since its requires ‘patience and painstaking observation’ construed to be typical ‘feminine’ attributes. Similarly, cone-winding is done exclusively by older women within the households. These women are beset by the twin problem of being burdened with domestic household responsibilities and inability to find jobs in the knitting industry on account of their age. They are paid very low piece rate wages amounting to 5 or 6 Rs. per day.

However, these perceptions have not completely held sway over time. It is to be remembered that stitching, which was done exclusively by men until the early 1980s, currently employs a lot of women. In fact, among the study firms, women work in nearly 40 per cent of the stitching jobs. At present, few women are employed even in cutting. Hence, a dynamic interplay of patriarchal codes of conduct that constrain women from
taking up certain kinds of work and survival strategies of worker households appear to influence the nature of women's position in the labour market.

With regard to caste segmentation, during the 1960s and 1970s, labour was sourced largely from the Gounders and Mudaliar communities. Members of these castes had kinship links with other caste members who had access to capital for small-scale ventures as the knitting industry of that period. The export phase, on the other hand, has seen the large-scale entry of Dalit labour, both migrant and local. The latter have gradually followed the Gounder youth in their villages, as the demand for labour in the knitwear industry increased and that for agricultural labour diminished, due to the decline in profitability of agriculture. Though there is no concrete data available on the overall caste composition of the workforce, the fact that a significant section of migrant workers have been former agricultural workers with no ties to ownership of land, or belong to such families, makes their caste status clear. Information obtained on the caste status collected from informants during the fieldwork also supports this hypothesis.

This section of the labour force, unlike workers from the intermediate castes has no social and communal access to capital resources through kinship ties. Hence, the prospect of vertical mobility, by way of 'mining of communal capital' is totally foreclosed as far as Dalits are concerned. As one of them, a local employed in a dyeing unit remarked, "How can we start a unit? We don't have any land. Moreover, none of our relatives have any. But when a Gounder boy marries, he gets 50 to 75 sovereigns of gold as dowry. And in addition to this, if he sells his father's land, he can easily set up a unit. Or he can join with his cousins who would share the costs of investment. But we can't do that. Even banks will not lend us loans, as we have nothing to borrow against. Even the house that we live in belongs to the government" (Ramesh, worker in dyeing unit, interview by the author in Tiruppur, 29/6/1997). Thus, the prospects of moving into profit-making from that of wage-earning is open only to workers of intermediate castes who have access to kinship capital at present.

There has been a diversification in the composition of entrepreneurship in the post 1990s period. A new set of entrepreneurs from other sectors, viz., bureaucrats, professionals and educationally qualified have began to enter into the industry during this period. Though
some of them have worked in knitting units owned by their relatives for a brief period, it was only to have an understanding of the industry before starting units of their own. The traditional worker-entrepreneurs find themselves at a disadvantaged position in accessing the world market as compared to this new class of 'professionalised' capital. The latter, by means of their better educational qualifications and social contacts are well-placed to compete in the global market by virtue of their better ability to establish contact with buyers by travelling abroad, participating in trade fairs or accessing market information through literature. Workers with poor educational qualifications find all these extremely difficult. This becomes all the more important, given the fact that the market has become more competitive over the years. Earlier, buyers came to Tiruppur with orders and distributed it among the manufacturers. Hence, access to the market was very easy for the entrepreneurs during that period. With growing competition, both internal and external, it has become more difficult for capital to access importers without recourse to travel abroad or visit to trade fairs. It therefore further places barriers to the movement from job-worker or sub-contractor to direct exporter status. Time and again, during the study of the sub contracting firms, we found that while worker entrepreneurs viewed the entry into direct exports as one wrought with risk due to their inability to communicate, travel and negotiate, 'professional' capital sees itself as future direct exporters very easily. Many of them were in the process of sending samples to importers, writing letters, contacting buyers through friends or relatives settled abroad, etc. To them, unlike traditional capital, the transition is a smooth process. Thus, it appears that the success of the Tiruppur knitwear industry in the global market has been accompanied by changes in the labour market that negate some of the key features of the 'high road' path cited in earlier studies.

Summary

This chapter addressed the role of labour markets in imparting flexibility to the production structure. Further, we also sought to understand the means by which capital ensures reproduction of the labour force under uncertain product market conditions.

The increase in demand for labour has been met by recourse to incorporation of new segments like female and Dalit local labour, and importantly migrant labour from other districts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The process of incorporation has also reinforced
labour market segmentation along gender, age and nativity. We further find that ‘numerical’ rather than ‘functional’ flexibility of labour use through use of contract and casual labour, and flexible work hours has contributed to the ability of the Tiruppur knitwear formation to sustain itself under flexible product market conditions. Given the uncertain duration of employment, workers including child workers are forced to work for excessively long hours only to face bouts of unemployment during off-season. Further, despite increases in nominal wage rates, real wage rates have stagnated through the export phase. Capital in fact, maintains lower real wage rates by employing family labour enabling payment of lower wages to individual members. Use of migrant labour who alternate between employment in the knitwear industry and agricultural work too plays a critical role in ensuring flexibility of labour use.

It is found that prior to the export phase and in the initial years of exports, when the output market was more stable, the labour market did correspond to the ideal industrial district model in many respects. Workers were found to be equipped with multiple skills, income security and more importantly, enjoyed good prospects of vertical mobility, not a common feature of most industrial districts in the peripheral economies. Many owners have been earlier employed as workers in this industry. This has even led to upholding the use of child labour in Tiruppur in certain quarters, as it offers children a near-sure route to security of employment and income that might not perhaps be possible if they were to pursue regular schooling.

However, interestingly, with a growing flexibility in the product market, the labour market has witnessed greater segmentation, with reduced scope for developing multiple skills and growth of barriers to vertical mobility. It is found that rising initial capital investments and exclusivity of caste networks have placed insurmountable barriers to mobility to a large section of the labour force. Further, the high labour turnover and lack of long-term relationship with employers deny them any kind of patronage that workers of the earlier period enjoyed. With the new requirements of cultural capital on account of exports, which privileges ‘professional, elite’ capital over the traditional worker-capitalists in the competition for the global market, the prospects of vertical mobility for labour in Tiruppur have considerably eroded.
Appendix 5.1
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LABOUR STUDY

I Personal Information:

1. Name of the informant:
2. Address:

3. Religion/Caste a) FC b) BC c) SC d) others

Age : Marital Status:

Place of origin:
If migrant, reasons for migrating?

II Employment Details:
Current Employment.

Type of work:

Name of the firm:

Type: a. Direct Exporter b. SC c. JW d. Local e. ancillary (specify)

Nature of employment: a. permanent b. casual c. temporary.

Approximate date of joining the job

How did you obtain the work?

a. Through a relation
b. caste or community contacts
c. had the required qualifications d. apprentice with this employer
e. other personal contact f. through labour contractor
g. others. (specify)

How did you acquire the skills for your job?

a. apprenticeship
b. b. training on the job in earlier employment.
c. Not required
d. d. others. (specify)

Period of training/apprenticeship –

Wages during this period. (Rs/shift) -
Are you
a. directly employed or
b. work for a labour contractor

What do you prefer? Why?

Do you prefer
a. casual,
b. irregular employment
c. regular permanent employment
Give reasons.

How many days did you work last month?

How many months did you work last year?

Was last year particularly bad?

Do you think that you get more or less work in a year now than when you started working?

a. More b. Less c. Same
If a) or b), elaborate

How many hours do you work per day?

a. Last week
b1. Peak season
b2. normal period

When work is not available in your current unit, do you go to other units for work?
Yes / No
If yes, how often did you change in the previous year/two years?

During slack season do you go for outside work?

If yes, what kind of work?

a. agriculture
b. powerloom
c. handloom.
d. retail trade
e. others (specify)

Previous employment:
Name of the establishments in which you have worked before coming to this firm, give details.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of firm</th>
<th>Year of Joining</th>
<th>No. of years worked</th>
<th>Reasons for Leaving</th>
<th>Wage Rate</th>
<th>Job Type</th>
<th>Skills required</th>
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At what age did you enter the labour market?

Reasons for entering. (details)

III Wage Details:

What is the system of wage payment? a. Piece-rate b. Time-rate

What do you prefer? Why?

What do you think that the owners prefer? Why?

Has there been any change in this mode recently? If yes, what do you think are the reasons?

How much do you earn per shift? If piece-rate, give standard amount.

How much did you earn last week? (If no work, the latest week when you worked)

How is the amount fixed? Is it based on trade union agreement?

Do you feel that this is less when compared to other units?

If yes, why haven't you bargained or tried to shift units?

Is there any deduction or cutting of your wage?

If yes, on what ground and what rate?

How much bonus did you get last year?

Was it better than the previous year? Yes No

If no, elaborate.
Do you know how it is fixed? Yes / No

Are you aware of ESI, PF? Yes / No

Do you avail these benefits? Yes / No

Do you have the following in your company?
   a) Latrines and urinals
   b) Washing and bathing facility
   c) Arrangement for drinking water
   d) Dining space
   e) Transport facilities.

During peak season, do you have health problems due to long work hours? Yes / No
If yes, explain.

IV. Work Details:

Can you move onto better jobs? Yes / No

If yes, what kind of job can you move into?

Do you think that you can become a supervisor? Yes / No If no, why?

Do you work on imported or local machines?

Any technical change in the machinery used at work? Yes / No

If yes, how has it affected your work?

Do you know any other job in this industry? If yes, give details

Have you done any of these jobs during the last year?

V Housing particulars:

a. Hut  b. Tiled  c. Concrete  d. Any other

   a. Owned  b. Rented

If rented, how much is the monthly rent (in rupees)?

Where do you gather water for drinking purpose?
   a) Owned well
   b) Neighbour
   c) Public tap
   d) Public well

Do you have water shortage? Yes/ No
VI Family details:
(Family refers to all household members and others supported by the respondent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex (M/F)</th>
<th>Relation to Worker</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Monthly Income</th>
</tr>
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Distance from home to work centre in km.

How long does it take for you travel from home to work?

Mode of travel to work centre
a) Walking b) Bus c) Bicycle d) others (specify)

VII General opinion:

Is there one or more trade unions where you work? Yes / No

Are you member of any trade union? Yes / No

If yes, a) CITU  b) AITUC  c) LPF  d) Others. specify

If no, why haven't you joined?

How many workers of your factory are members of your or other trade union?

Did you approach the union for any problem related with industry? Yes / No

If yes, details.

Have you protested against any action by the employer that you felt were wrong? Yes / No

If yes, give details.

When was the last time that there was a problem between the workers and management in the firms that you have worked?

Can you describe the nature of the problem?

Do you prefer to work for a) Local firm b) Direct Exporter or c) Subcontractor

Why?

Will you give up this job, if you get alternative employment? Yes/ No

Can you suggest any other type of work, which you would prefer to do?