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When the Lewisian Dream Sours: Industrial Aspirations and Reverse Labour Migration

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated processes of labour transition from industrial work to the informal economy, which have always characterised the life of the working poor. This paper explores this kind of reverse transition, i.e. when the Lewisian dream of having an industrial job comes to an end and workers are forced into a reverse migration. Specifically, the paper focuses on the post-industrial experiences of former Indian garment workers leaving the National Capital Region (NCR) and moving back to Bihar. Emphasis is placed on workers' reasons for leaving the industry and their current employment and reproductive strategies. Findings are based on a sample of 50 former workers, identified in urban industrial hamlets and traced back to their place of origin. Respondents' experiences are analysed based on semi-quantitative questionnaires and life histories. Findings reveal that upon leaving the factory, workers find alternative informal employment through caste or social networks whilst using land as safety net. They suggest that farming and informal work are not alternative but rather complementary income and work strategies. By adopting a lifecycle approach to studying labour transitions across formal and informal employment domains, this analysis contributes to policy debates on decent work.*

Key words: Feminist Political Economy, Informal Labor Markets, Regional Labour Migration, Labour Transitions, Post-Industrial Livelihoods, Lifecycle Approach

JEL codes: P160, B54, J460, R23

1. Introduction

Many economic analyses of labour-intensive industries like textile or garment present factory work and employment relations in these sectors as positive alternatives to informal economic activities. The Lewisian parable of workers in labour surplus economies moving from low paid, low productive work in the agricultural sector to higher wage, higher productivity jobs in the urban industrial sector is still often accepted as an inevitable progression for development (Lewis, 1954). Hence, factory work is generally represented by much of the development literature as a sort of point of arrival for the working poor, which is therefore supposed to move from more informal to more formal jobs (e.g. Powell, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis has abruptly unsettled the simplistic assumptions behind these narratives of linear progress. The crisis suddenly revealed how many industrial sectors rely on greatly precarious rural migrant workers. During the pandemic, they were quickly expelled from production networks and occupations in urban centres and in places like India they had to start a proper exodus to return to their villages (e.g. Samaddar, 2020). One could argue that COVID-19 escalated one of the most sudden urban-rural transitions in the recent history of world capitalism. In this process, many rural migrants returned to informal occupations and/or farming, struggling to reconstruct viable livelihoods (e.g. Carswell et al, 2021a, 2021b; Mishra, 2021).

Notably, whilst COVID-19 represents a remarkable rupture in productive and reproductive trajectories (Kabeer et al, 2021; Stevano et al, 2021), one could argue that its unravelling has also laid bare a number of existing processes and trends. For instance, it has revealed the analytical weakness of a number of dichotomies and overly sharp distinctions deployed to picture the world of work and that have significantly

overplayed differences between formal and informal – and/or industrial and non-industrial - employment and occupations. In fact, well before COVID hit, scholars like Martha Alter Chen (2012) and Jens Lerche (2010) have theorised formal and informal employment relations as strongly interrelated, and best conceptualized as situated along a *continuum* (see also Breman, 1996). Within this *continuum,* one can imagine different typologies of labour transitions taking place. If one involves workers moving from more informal occupations to factory labour – much of the literature on global factories stresses the rural origins of the workers employed (e.g. Wright, 2006; Pun et al, 2015; Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015) – another far less studied typology of labour transition implies workers moving from factories back into informal employment, in a sort of reverse Lewisian movement. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey in India captures this macro trend quite starkly. The employment in agriculture as percentage share of total employment has gone up from 42.5% in 2018-19 to 45.6% in 2019-20, a reverse movement for almost 12-13 million workers in one year. This movement also entails a reduction of daily wages that workers have chosen to go back to as the wages for casual labour in agriculture for the same period was Rs. 291 as compared to Rs. 349 for self-employed and Rs.558 for salaried jobs. This article explores this second type of transition, which, whilst escalated by the pandemic, has always been at work.

Notably, notwithstanding noteworthy exceptions (e.g. Prentice, 2017; Hewamanne, 2018) post-industrial work analyses still represent a significant gap in the literature. However, their potential to contribute to debates on working poverty and livelihoods is considerable. Evidence suggests that many workers employed across the global garment assembly line stop working by their time they are 30-35 (Pun et al, 2015; Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). What do their livelihood opportunities look like after their industrial experience is over? Do workers access new socio-economic

opportunities? Do they accumulate savings and/or key skill-sets thanks to the garment factory? Or do they accumulate debt? Can they turn into successful micro-entrepreneurs? Or do they move back into informal employment? What are the narratives former workers deploy to represent their own past industrial experience and current livelihood options? While these questions are often overlooked, they can enable us to concretely assess the link between contemporary labour relations and working poverty across the factory/non-factory and formal/informal divide, and explore the informal economy as a site where both accumulation and exploitation can take place (e.g. Maiti and Sen, 2010). Moreover, the same questions are crucial to analyse working poverty *as it is experienced across workers' life cycle*, and not simply during a temporary phase of employment.

Overall, this analysis stresses the relevance of adopting a *life-cycle approach* to the study of working poverty, as single, temporary moments of employment are not sufficient to capture the challenges faced by the working poor. In doing so, the analysis is anchored to understandings of work and labour which are not confined to the narrowly defined social perimeters of labour processes or individual spaces of work, but that stress the intersections between productive and reproductive dynamics and domains, and embeddedness in different physical and social geographies. In this sense, we also proposes a novel approach to the study of informal/ised employment across varied spaces of work, informed by debates on labour and social reproduction (Naidu and Ossome, 2016; Mezzadri, 2019, 2020a; Rao, 2021), and attentive to different local socio-economic ecologies. In fact, across the life cycle, the livelihood opportunities available to the rural working poor undergo a 'double movement' of sorts (Banerjee, 2010) and employability would be coterminous on that movement. Post-factory opportunities would also vary depending on this. Finally, State policies, as mediated by

caste, gender, geographical provenance and mobility, are also likely to shape distinct livelihood opportunities and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Banerjee, 2016) across the areas workers return to after their industrial experience is concluded.

This analysis focuses on workers formerly employed in the Delhi industrial conglomerate, the National Capital Region (NCR); a key hub of India's *Sweatshop Regime* (Mezzadri, 2017). The NCR, comprising Delhi, Gurgaon, Manesar and Faridabad in Haryana, NOIDA and Greater NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh, and increasingly stretching across the Delhi-Jaipur industrial belt, is a complex industrial formation, characterised by great labour mobility and multiple processes of labour circulation (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015; Cowan, 2018). It mainly sources its millions of workers from UP and Bihar. This sets challenging conditions for doing research on former workers, as the majority of them return to their village of origin upon leaving the garment factory for good. For this reason, the analysis has focused on a small sample of fifty workers, whose post-industrial work experiences were analysed using mixed methods; first, through a semi-quantitative questionnaires, and then for a sub-set, through the collection of seventeen life histories. The sample was constructed deploying multiple snowballing techniques; namely, collecting lists of contacts from Kapashera, one of the largest housing hamlets for industrial workers in the NCR, and from unions working in the area. Workers were contacted using details from this initial list; further snowballing took place in Bihar in February-early March 2020, where research started in the area of Patna, and then moved to surrounding districts.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the fieldwork process significantly. The collection of life histories was suspended in May 2020, due to national and local lockdowns and in order to mitigate potential health risks. Several life histories were collected by phone when fieldwork resumed, from April 2021. The

decision to suspend fieldwork also reflected our desire to abide to ethical ways of conducting research, avoiding 'piratic' and/or merely 'extractive' methods (Tilley, 2017; Okech, 2020), particularly given the magnitude of the compounded health and economic crises triggered by COVID-19. This choice had its costs, as by the time we resumed fieldwork in 2021, the phone numbers of several respondents did not work any longer, most likely also due to the financial impact of the pandemic on India's working communities, an issue increasingly well-documented through case studies across the whole Subcontinent (e.g. Samaddar, 2020; Agarwal, 2021). Yet, we strongly feel that our choices were ethically necessary. Despite the dramatic events and related difficulties, we were able to finalise the collection of field-based findings by July 2021. We report our findings in in the sections below, starting with a discussion of the social profile of the respondents. [1] These findings clearly indicate, echoing the title of our article, the souring of the Lewisian dream for informalised workers in the garment industry, who go through a process of reversed migration taking them back where they were initially 'released' as labour for the industrial sector.

2. Labour transitions during and after garment work and workers' profile

The majority of studies on the garment industry in the NCR agree on the social profile of its workforce: most workers are male circulatory migrants from the Hindi belt, particularly from UP and Bihar (Singh and Kaur Sapra, 2007; Mezzadri and Srivastava,

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[1] Ibrar Raza was the research assistant initially appointed for this project, and his work on data collection was crucial. He conducted the initial survey through questionnaires to the Bihari workers identified during the initial mapping, and helped identifying others on the basis of local snowballing. He also collected the first life histories, before COVID-19 disrupted the fieldwork process. Other life histories were collected by Mohammad Aaquib, Govind Kumar, Keshav Singh and Rajiv Ranjan (all based in Patna, Bihar), on the basis of the contact list and networks developed through the initial mapping and questionnaires. The interviews were transcribed in Hindi by Bhaskar Jha and then translated into English by Madhavi Shivaprasad and Shrawan Jha.

2015; Mani et al, 2018). Arguably, the in-work experiences of these migrants already include multiple labour transitions, which may either involve crossing urban-rural corridors or quickly circulating between multiple industrial units. Classic *yearly circulation*, which is greatly widespread in India (Breman, 2013; Shah and Lerche, 2020), where workers move back to their place of origin during the industrial lean season (which often overlaps with festivals and harvest seasons), is paralleled by *industrial circulation* (Mezzadri, 2017), that is the transition of workers from one industrial unit to another in the same industrial area.

According to a 2013-14 survey (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015), yearly circulation in the NCR garment industry represented only one third of all circulatory movements, while industrial circulation was at 60 percent. This means that almost two thirds of the industrial workforce worked in the same industrial premise for less than one year. These multiple labour transitions at work in the NCR call for high degrees of labour flexibility, with implications for workers' social profile. In northern India, the type of workforce able to sustain these multiple transitions can only be male and relatively young. It is hence unsurprising that also our sample in this study, which arguably explores yet another labour transition in the industry – the final exit from industrial work - reflected this. Almost all our respondents, namely 96 percent, were male, and only two women workers were sampled and interviewed. All respondents were above 35 years age; that is generally the cut-off age for work in the industry, either due to retrenchment or exhaustion (Mezzadri, 2017).

Collating a sample was probably one of the most significant challenges of this study; already well before the outbreak of COVID-19. This is because the extreme mobility, numerous labour transitions and social profile of the workforce set significant hurdles to the identification of who has actually left the industry for good – many continue

circulating back to the NCR – and where these people relocated. The sample was built thanks to multiple snowballing entry points. We started our post-work inquiry in Kapashera. Here, initial connections and informal chats with a few housing contractors, in September 2019, confirmed a high proportion of workers from Bihar and UP employed in the garment industry and residing in the industrial hamlet. In fact several contractors overseeing 'the lines' – the rows of rooms where industrial workers live in Kapashera, which resemble the plantation lines deployed as housing during colonial times (Mezzadri, 2020b) – once were garment workers too. They stayed on in the urban industrial hamlet even after they left the industry.

Contacts with unions were crucial to build a list of former garment workers, and this was deployed as a guide for our search of our questionnaires targets in Bihar. In Bihar, the search often involved a complex, informal process of contact tracing – a proper manhunt at times – as many workers have changed contact details, like phone numbers, and others may have migrated elsewhere. A significant portion of those leaving the industry, however, goes back to their place of origin, and we captured this segment of the former industrial population. Once in Bihar, the survey started in Patna in February 2020, and then it snowballed to the districts of Nalanda and Muzaffarpur. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whose spread reached India by mid March 2020, the physical interviews for life histories had to be stopped after 8 interviews (conducted till mid March 2020. The rest of the life histories were collected via phone. This was possible due to the completion of the questionnaire by that date. The geographical distribution of the sample is given in Graph 1.

Insert Graph 1 here

In the sample, 68 percent of workers were Hindus and 32 percent Muslims, confirming the relative over-representation of Muslim labour in the northern garment industry,

which is a trait linked to the early origins of tailoring during the Mughal Empire (Roy, 2013). All respondents were married, with children. In terms of caste, previous surveys in the NCR indicated the dominance of General Castes (GCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and this was also confirmed by our survey. However, we decided to breakdown the very large category of OBCs into two sections: OBCs and Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a category in fact only deployed in the state of Bihar in India, and which has been championed and implemented by the current State government. Overall, 38 percent of respondents were OBCs, and 36 percent were GCs. EBCs, however, represented a sizeable portion of respondents in the districts surveyed on the basis of our initial list – namely, 26 percent, which is almost a third of respondents as represented in Graph 2.

Insert Graph 2 here

The education level of respondents is lower than that generally reported for garment workers in the NCR (e.g. Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). The great majority of former migrant workers reported to be illiterate. Only 25 percent went through formal schooling as represented in Graph 3.

Insert Graph 3 here

Information on their household member reveals very low education levels overall. Only in one family we found one member holding a BA. In 20 families there was at least one member who finished 10 years of schooling. However, in the remaining 29, there was not a single member who finished formal schooling as represented in Graph 4.

Insert Graph 4 here

While adult family members had low levels of education, households reported that their children were currently attending school as represented in Graph 5.

Insert Graph 5 here

The low education profile of the former workers identified may have to do with skills and tasked performed, as with geographical provenance, as it will be discussed in the section below, which also discusses findings on recruitment, wages and termination of industrial employment in the garment industry.

3. Labour's former industrial life: recruitment, wages and reasons for leaving

The former workers interviewed in the districts surveyed have worked for a handful of renowned garment companies in the NCR. The majority were helpers or checkers; only 6 percent were tailors and very few (2 percent) quality managers. Therefore, our sample shows a certain bias towards the bottom of the employment ladder in garment industry. However, this bias is valuable, as it provides information on the implications of garment work for vulnerable working classes of the NCR-Bihar belt. Bihari workers perform many of the low-skills positions in garment companies, and are also higher in number. UP workers – the other dominant category, on shopfloors and workshops (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015), and also home-based units (Unni and Scaria, 2013) - are generally considered more skilled. This is also because of the original caste division of labour in the industry, which held on until the 1960s and 1970s, before the export boom made it untenable. Initially, the caste of Darzis dominated the tailoring craft (Lal). Muslim Darzis were found to be concentrated in UP. With the export boom, which initiated in the 1970s, the caste-nexus in the industry faded, as there was a considerable increase in demand for labourers. In the garment industry, circular migration from Bihar – otherwise a widespread phenomenon since colonial times - starts becoming

significant during this period (Mezzadri, 2017). The distribution of jobs performed in the NCR garment industry reported by respondents is represented in Graph 6.

Insert Graph 6 here

Former garment workers mainly reported to have been recruited via local contractors (thekedaars); only 20 percent reported ‘direct’ recruitment at factory gates as represented in Graph 7.

Insert Graph 7 here

In fact, even workers directly recruited may well be managed by contractors, once they enter the factory. This is a well-established practice, which blurs contract and direct labour relations (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015; Lerche et al, 2018). For those recruited by contractors, the contracting relation may have been initiated in Bihar, where local contractors are in contact with those in the NCR. In fact, while it may be the case that some contractors travel all the way to the NCR with their ‘teams’ – this happens, for instance, in embroidery networks (Mezzadri, 2017), where workers also sleep and live in the working space owned by the itinerant contractor – in most cases local contractors feed into wider contracting networks. This ‘cascade of labour intermediaries’ (Barrientos, 2013) controls labour across the Hindi belt corridor until it reaches the NCR, and often during their whole period of employment. The relaxation of the contract labour act by the Government of India (GoI), which was first rolled over in the textile and garment sector before being expanded to all sectors with the labour reforms of the second BJP government further blurs the distinction between contract and regular employment. As a result, rates of contract labour have gone up in India across sectors (Srivastava, 2016).

The majority of former workers surveyed have worked in the garment industry for either 5 years or between 5-10 years (represented in Graph 8). This is an important finding, as the industrial employment period suggests that garment work is overall temporary in the lives of these workers. Many travel to the NCR for a limited period of time, and leave within 10 years.

Insert Graph 8 here

Notably, a similar study on former workers conducted in Bangalore, provided quite different findings. There, former workers interviewed about their past experience - mostly women, given the substantially different labour relations at work in the Indian South (Mezzadri and Majumder, 2018, 2020) – reported to have worked in the sector for at least 10 years, with many having worked on and off in the industry – notwithstanding high rates of break in service – for 20 years. On the other hand, Bangalore’s overall labour regime is based on the feminisation of factory production and a focus on mass-produced basic garments. While this is only one of the multiple gendered pathways followed by the garment commodity chain in India, also based on pre-existing regional patriarchal systems, it is the one where women’s bodies at work are most visible (Mezzadri, 2016). Findings suggest that in the north, in the NCR, where the labour regime is based on the ‘masculinisation’ of factory and workshop production, and women are mostly segregated in home-based value-addition – employment in the sector may be far more temporary, flexible, and ultimately volatile.

Based on the above, one should note that for the sample of workers interviewed, employment in the garment industry was already the result of previous labour markets’ transitions, mostly from informal jobs. In fact, the families of the former garment workers also mostly engage in informal occupation. Women are confined to doing reproductive work within the household, children study, while other male members

who are not direct dependent mostly perform different informal activities, ranging from self-employment (including petty services) to casual labour. A few engaged in agricultural casual work, others (roughly 1/5th) reported regular employment (as represented in Graph 9).

Insert Graph 9 here

The monthly income reported by respondents during their garment employment was broadly in line with the information provided by surveys of the sector in the NCR, with wages mostly set between 5,000 and 10,000 INR (represented in Graph 10).

Insert Graph 10 here

These are hardly high salary levels, and explain well why workers do not feel committed to the sector overall, and may have experienced many labour market transitions in their lives before terminating work in the industry and once again changing their livelihood strategies once they hit 35. This age seems to be the age cut-off for the majority of garment workers, in India and in most of the garment export-producing countries (Mezzadri and Majumder, 2018).

Low salary levels (low real wages) are also reported to be the main reason for leaving the industry by the majority of respondents. In fact, life histories reveal that even when nominal wages salaries were higher in the industry, they were often not enough to account for urban-rural differentials, for coping with the harshness of working rhythms, and they did not guarantee savings. Another significant factor was factory closures. This means that the flexible employment geography of the industry, with its high levels of break in service and continuous labour circulatory movements is drawn by both employers and workers; in other word, by both capital and labour. On the one hand, employers may terminate employment through factory closures, due to effective

company closure or simply relocation or termination of one industrial unit within the industrial network of the company, which in the NCR is often comprised of several others. On the other hand, however, also workers may decide voluntarily to leave the sector, given its strenuous rhythms and low salaries. Former workers also listed family reasons and health issues as other causes for leaving, and a few also mentioned better opportunities (represented in Graph 11). Health issues were reported consistently both in questionnaires as well as in life histories.

Insert Graph 11 here

Once workers terminate their fragmented industrial employment experience in the garment sector they face yet another labour transition, which adds to those already experienced before joining the sector and during their very period of employment in garment factories when, as we have discussed above, workers already circulated several times back to their place of origin on a yearly basis as well as across the many industrial units of the NCR. As we shall detail in the next section, once back to their place of origin, workers' labour and reproduction trajectory becomes fairly different from that shaped by industrial work. It is based on a range of informal activities, as well as land.

4. Post-industrial livelihoods, land and social reproduction

Studies of workers in industrial areas in India often stress the precarious living conditions they face, often crammed in industrial hamlets or hostels which may lack access to basic amenities and *de-facto* do not look that different from urban slums. The living arrangements of workers in industrial hubs is where they reproduce *daily* – that is, where workers sustain themselves at the end of their long shifts and where they regenerate their capacity to toil for factories. In China and other East Asian countries like Vietnam several authors have illustrated how these daily reproductive spaces are

greatly connected with the rhythms and pace of factory work, so to represent almost an extension of them (e.g. Pun, 2007; Cerimele, 2016). The Chinese giant industrial conglomerate Foxconn owns entire villages across China, where its workers live in the company dormitories and are fully integrated into the factory 'way of life', in a system where the boundaries between work and non-work times have been erased. Given the centrality of this system to manufacture social compliance and readily available cheap labour for the factory, Pun and Smith (2007) call it the 'dormitory labour regime'. In the NCR, dormitories and large infrastructural solutions hosting the industrial proletariat are replaced by more informal living arrangements in local hamlets, enclaves, or by the industrial version of the old plantation 'lines'. The latter arrangement characterises the area of Kapashera (see Cowan, 2018), which is where this study started from.

Conditions of work in the industrial hamlets and enclaves of the NCR further explain why workers prefer to go back after some years of service. Quality of life is rather low, and can only be sustained for a limited period of time. As we have seen in the previous section, the salary is also not sufficient to entice workers to stay, even in the case they were not retrenched. Moreover, reproduction in the urban industrial area is only for single individual (male) workers – who in many cases share a tiny room with 5-8 others (see also Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). It does not cater for family life.

When asked about current occupations, workers report varied trajectories (as represented in graph 12).

Insert Graph 12 here

None of these seem to suggest they turn into self-entrepreneurs, as suggested by studies in other countries instead (e.g. Hewamanne, 2019). Obviously, this has to do with the

low salaries these workers have earned during their industrial employment period, which was not sufficient to generate savings. Hardly turning into successful entrepreneurs, former garment workers, instead, engage in a number of informal occupations, like their working household members; ranging from tailoring, basket weaving, working as barbers, driving totos (mini autorickshaws), doing daily construction work or selling fruits. A few also engage in agricultural labour.

Their earnings in Bihar, highly variable, may be subject to the significant fluctuations of the informal economy. However, it may not be significantly lower than it was in the NCR, and as such it may guarantee a better life for returning migrants (as represented in graph 13).

Insert Graph 13 here

A full picture of workers' earnings in the NCR and in Bihar is provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Findings reveal that for the majority of respondents (50 percent) reporting earning less than in the NCR, the fall in income post-industrial work is actually not dramatic; in fact, 68 percent earn only 500-1500 rupees less. For one third of former workers, the fall is more significant, with 24 percent earning 2000-4000 less, and 8 % earning 4000 less. However, the bottom of the distribution includes former workers who do not actually work for a wage and/or earn currently (women and the one tea-staller in the sample).

Notably, findings for India may differ substantially from those for other countries also due to the place India has in the global garment commodity chain (GGCC). A study by Hewamanne (2019), in particular, highlights the possibility for virtuous cycles for Sri

Lankan women garment workers once they leave the factories and go back to their villages, where many are able to initiate successful petty businesses thanks to savings accumulated during their employment period in garment factories. Sri Lanka covers a very special role in the GGCC; that of ethical, virtuous hub (Ruwanpura, 2016). Hence, salaries and contributions in the sector, while still problematic, are far better than those experienced in India or Bangladesh, which are instead global hubs for, respectively, niche markets targeting highly specialised and embellished production or large basic (and cheap) garment orders. Given the stark differences in typologies of commodity production, business models and wage levels, corresponding differences in trajectories and opportunities open – or not - to former garment workers across different countries are hardly surprising.

Findings on incomes and wages reveal that, in India, not only former garment workers were largely unable to save; they were also not necessarily able to send remittances home during their employment period in the garment factory. Unlike what was reported by workers in the lower rungs of the garment supply chains (Mezzadri, 2015), the Bihari former garment workers we surveyed highlight that their salaries were just enough to guarantee their individual survival in the urban area, but insufficient to support family financial necessities back home. Indeed, in the last five years, demonetisation, food inflation, and the rise in taxation triggered by changes in goods and service tax (GST, see Das, 2017) have all contributed to real wage stagnation or even decline for India's working classes. In sectors like textile and garment, where nominal wages must be kept down due to international competition, workers' purchasing power has declined dramatically. Coupled with the harsh living arrangements workers faced in urban industrial hamlets, where the rent-squeeze imposed on industrial workers by local slumlords and their contractors has also gone up (Tiwari, 2015; Cowan, 2018), workers'

inability to save would explain the relatively short period of time the workers surveyed here stayed on in garment factories before returning to their place of origin.

Indeed, living arrangements overall seem much better at place of origin than in the NCR, where the majority lived in over-crowded Kapashera. Respondents mostly lived in what in India are classified as pucca houses; properly constructed homes. Only 4 percent reported living in kuchcha houses; less solid construction more in line with slum-dwellings. Only 6 percent lived in rented accommodation (as represented in Graph 14). The vast majority had their own houses. In fact, it is on this basis that they could return to it upon finishing their employment experience in the garment factory. Land too was a factor.

Insert Graph 14 here

The great majority of former workers surveyed owned some land. Only 12 percent were landless. The majority, 76 percent, only owned less than 5 kathas of land. Only 10 percent owned between 5 and 10 khatas; and only 2 percent more than that (as represented in Graph 15).

Insert Graph 15 here

The marginality of the land owned by former garment workers surveyed in Bihar signifies that respondents always mainly relied on the labour market to survive. At the same time, however, it would be erroneous to consider land ownership as meaningless. The Lewisian model of labour surplus economies underestimated the importance of land ownership in developing economies. In fact, even if land cannot be considered as profit making or a key component of household income, together with house ownership it still provides some collateral and insurance against periods of financial adversity.

Moreover, land provides a reproductive safety net; a place for the household to wait for the circular migrant to come back home, given the inability of industrial hamlets to accommodate or reproduce family life. In quite a few cases, the subsistence production that may take place on this marginal land can still complement family income in kind. In short, despite its economic marginality, land remains central to livelihoods; it still represents the pivot around which the broad social reproduction of the household can organise. During the short returning spells of circular migration, during industrial lean seasons, the household will reabsorb the reproduction of garment workers also thanks to this land. After the final labour transition through which garment workers leave their factory jobs behind, households will reabsorb these workers for good, also thanks to this land. Former garment workers' employment trajectories, as we have seen, will soon realign with those of the other family members left behind.

Arguably, while providing crucial information on post-industrial work livelihoods, information on the lack of full land dispossession also provides key insights on the features and reproduction of industrial labour regimes. In fact, this lack of full dispossession is central to the ability of employers to externalise the cost of the social reproduction of the workforce to the villages and small town where workers come from (Mezzadri, 2019). For however marginal, the small patches of land owned by the industrial workforce in India work as a very effective subsidy to both capital and labour. While representing a key coping mechanism for workers, central to their highly diversified livelihood based on many labour transitions, labour's land is also turned into an effective mechanism to reduce employers' labour and social costs. The role land plays in livelihood strategies and how it intersects with informal employment will be further explored based on workers' life histories.

It should be noted that findings do not suggest any relation between landholding and caste, also due to the marginality of the average land size reported by respondents overall, and set at below 1 acre. The few landless former garment workers within our sample were part of GCs. EBCs had overall a slightly higher average landholding 4.19 kathas, against an average of 2.6 and 2.47 for GCs and OBCs, respectively. Overall, for the scope of our study, potential inequalities between OBCs and EBCs – which may justify their subdivision into distinct groups as operated in Bihar - do not really translates into either industrial employment patterns or asset ownership.

Land remains the most significant form of indirect social insurance for former garment workers and their households. In fact, 60 percent of respondents did not possess any card, nor they reported to be covered by other government schemes. This said, 40 percent of the respondents reported possessing either BPL (below poverty line) or APL cards (as represented in Graph 16). Specifically, 18 percent reported possessing BPL cards, while 22 percent reported possessing APL (above the poverty line) cards. For these former workers, the net effect of the transition from factory employment and migratory work in urban areas to informal employment at place of origin also depends on this access to state provisions. Indeed, state policies have the capacity to mediate distinct livelihood opportunities and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Banerjee, 2016). In fact the double movement or reverse Lewisian movement in this specific case could be a result of inclusive strategies undertaken in Bihar, and could be operational in the local context; specifically, the EBC recognition drive undertaken by the present Bihar Government for the last five years could be a contributor to this.

Insert Graph 16 here

These findings on social entitlements are significant in several different ways. First, it suggests that one fifth of former garment workers are considered officially poor.

Ownership of BPL is also mediated partially by caste – albeit not linked to land - with a majority of EBC and only a few OBC former workers possessing such cards. Engagement in export-oriented sectors does not necessarily lift these workers out of poverty. And even in the case that garment work temporarily lifted the poorest segments of the workforce over the poverty line, upon leaving the industry a significant proportion of them may fall again below that line. Moreover, as none of the respondents reported leaving the sector with any sort of savings, even workers who are not the poorest are unable to use their earnings from garment work towards building a new, more profitable future. Overall, findings seem to confirm the temporariness of this type of industrial occupation, and its articulation – before workers join the garment factory, during their time at work in the factory, and after the completion of their industrial experience – with the informal occupations also performed by family members in their place of origin. In this light, through data provided by former workers, garment work mostly appear either as a form of working poverty, or at best as a very temporary relief to the precariousness of informal living. The next section gathers key insights on labour transitions as experienced and voiced by former garment workers.

5. Former workers' narratives: distinct trajectories and some common traits

Workers' own voices collected through life histories are incredibly useful in order to a) further qualify the reasons behind their initial transition to the NCR and final transition back to the village; b) assess workers' own explanations of the difference between their experience of industrial work in the NCR and their current experience in the village; and c) further appreciate the entanglement of land and informal work in their trajectories of transition away from industrial work.

Narratives consistently represent the decision to migrate to the NCR as part of a collective family strategy, rather than individual choice. Seeking employment outside

in the garment factory was seen as a way to subsidize the family left behind to tend the land or engaged in different informal occupations. Hence, the expectation of remittances was central to this collective strategy. This is a noteworthy reminder that theories seeking to explain employment practices and experiences should not necessarily adopt the individual as main point of reference to analyse and assess labour transitions and their outcomes. Individual workers are part of a collective also *de facto* in their move to the city and into industrial employment. Workers recalled joining others – either family members or acquaintances – in their outward trip to the NCR, and report sharing rooms with several workers. Their recollection of their life in Kapashera or other industrial hamlets is one where productive and reproductive work were tightly entangled. They experienced the burden of daily reproductive tasks, shared with the other workers with whom they lived, and they worked very long hours, overtime being largely the norm in garment factories in the Delhi metropolitan area. Narratives reveal that this productive-reproductive continuum was crossed by different forms of abuse and cheating, which workers wanted to spend time on explaining during interviews.

In particular, several of the workers who shared their histories with us ascribed their final decision of leaving the NCR as due not only to meagre earnings – which is what largely emerged in the questionnaires, and which we shall expand on shortly – but also due to being systematically cheated on or scolded by either labour contractors (thekedaars) or landlords and sellers (often connected) in the industrial hamlet. Several workers mentioned being shouted at and being verbally abused by contractors, and two mentioned contractors running away with their wages, events that then would trigger escalating violence from all those to whom payment was due. Balmiki recalls:

'The thekedaar would run away with the money. When he run away, then I would be trapped, the landlord would get violent… The grocer would get violent, he is catching hold of me, but how do I pay him?'

Workers' stories suggest high degree of control exercised in industrial hamlets. These are highly informal reproductive spaces, yet crossed by multiple relations of subordination workers are subjected to. Even renting a room does not imply entitlements towards a space beyond that of workers' own individual bodies. Rooms rented to three workers should not adjust guests. The landlord would know immediately if lodgers allowed anyone else in, and ask:

'Why are they more chappals (shoes) in front of your house today?'

In fact, workers' recall also confirms how labour contracting is greatly differentiated in the NCR, with some contractors being entirely informal and invisible in the factory system, and others instead being registered by the company and hence able to provide workers with access to social security like Provident Fund (PF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI). However, unlike in other areas, where workers reported the ability to routinely access their PF, workers mostly reported lack of access to these funds upon leaving, with one expressly referring to this practice as wage theft by contractors. Findings from other studies conducted in the NCR in fact suggest that labour contracting density may be further increasing since the beginning of the pandemic (Basu et al, forthcoming). They also confirm PF theft practices reported by our respondents.

According to workers' narratives, the hardship experienced in the NCR remained uncompensated by earnings – an issue also captured by questionnaires. Workers lamented how they could not systematically save, whilst saving opportunities were a

primary reason for outward migration. Overall, their narratives paint the process of circular migration as risky and not rewarding. Crucially, workers explained that saving was difficult, both due to the labour practices explained above, and due to the weight of daily reproductive costs on overall salaries. Jagdesh explained that even if one was working steadily, '*the money he gets in return, it is of no use, he is just forced to continue working there'* (interview held in June 2021). As harsh experience of work was ultimately not compensated financially, many talked about their decision to move back to the village as liberating. In the village one could at least be 'free', of '*the freedom where you don't have to put up with people swearing at you'.* Another worker explained:

> *"If I am earning a few paisa, good, but even if I am not, I am not answerable to anyone. And there, we have to be under someone's thumb. If I don't do [work] there, I have to listen to two words (criticism), if not, then I will die hungry."*

In fact, several workers interpreted heavy debt burdens and the concomitant abuse at the hands of *thekedaars*, landlord and shopkeepers in Kapashera as part of the same process of daily work insecurity. No wonder, many referred to their productive and reproductive factory work experiences as being one of bonded labour.

Exhaustion was also mentioned, although it remained a secondary reason to leave in workers' narratives. Undoubtedly, however, the move back to villages implied far less work in terms of reproductive activities. Certainly, these men only dealt with the reproductive burden during their experience of circular migration in the city, as the burden was immediately re-internalised by women and elders once they came back. In this light, workers' stories clearly spoke of the informal 'economies of care' represented by the village (Shah and Lerche, 2020) and which arguably also provided a financial

subsidy to the industry during times when workers routinely came home during their industrial employment period (Mezzadri, 2020a). In the words of Balmiki again:

> "*Here I have a house, door, my world is here. Even if I don't work one day, I can still eat. But there if I don't work one day, then I don't eat either".*

Several workers acknowledged earning less in the village – although not too significantly, as well-captured in questionnaires - however they also explained that their expenses were significantly lower, and they valued being able to live with their families. Freedom – *Azadi* – was once again a recurrent theme in workers' own assessment of the differences between industrial work in the NCR and their current occupations. Obviously, quite a few mentioned the hardship brought about by the recent lockdowns, however they talked about it as a collective experience that was hopefully temporary. There is a significant difference between these workers and those whose images circulated across social media worldwide, following the sudden lockdown announcement of March 22 by the Government of India. These workers were already at home in their villages, and did not have to embark onto such dramatic journey home. This said, some reported being in debt due to the pandemic, and struggling to find continuous employment. In fact, in terms of coping with this difficult period, land emerged once again as a key asset. All workers who shared their life histories with the exception of two were among those in our sample who reported to have some land.

In fact, life histories revealed how in the villages livelihood strategies are extremely porous, yet they always somehow seem to be connected to land. In this sense, while we expected to be able to map more significant differences in life-cycle trajectories among those who 'go back' to farming and those who engage in informal occupations, workers' own narratives reveal that this distinction does not necessarily hold. Work and income decisions and strategies – both of outward migration as well as industrial exit

and return to informal occupations – take into consideration social networks and family collective options and assets. Life histories of workers engaged in informal occupations also clearly highlight how access to family land remained central to their livelihood strategy as returnee migrants. At the same time, the informal occupations many returned to were often shaped by caste and social networks opportunities.

Several respondents who shared their life history with us where from the *Naai* caste, whose traditional occupation is being barbers. Some of them reported going back to this activity informally, as already practiced by other family members, hence utilising caste networks. None of the workers reported utilising savings from their period of industrial employment, as they were none. Whilst caste-networks may help reinserting workers in traditional informal activities, they do not represent workers' only opportunities, and people from the same caste and/or communities reported different post-industrial work trajectories. Devanandan, for instance, who also come from the *Naai* community, came back from Delhi to become a security guard in a local hospital. He reports accessing this opportunity through friends and acquaintances – that is community, rather than caste networks. This is to say that overall, life histories hardly pictured a specific functional relationship between caste and the post-industrial work trajectories. Indeed, caste occupational ties represent an option once workers go back to their village, but there are other opportunities shaped by life in the village. At times, the social networks offering new opportunities to returning workers may be inter-generational, as it is the case for Ranjeev, who managed to become a nurse thanks to connections related to his father's former employment in a low-rank government job. Whilst memories and narratives of the reasons why these workers quit their job in the garment industry are fairly comparable, their post-work opportunities vary on the basis of multiple factors.

However, there is one element of commonality to all the stories we collected, and that is the marginal presence of land in the livelihoods of the workers. As the results of the questionnaires show, the land owned by those who reported it among their assets is generally small. Yet, it forms part of a collective survival strategy for workers and their families. It did so during workers' migration experience in the NCR, when family members left behind in the village cultivated it, and it remains so after workers' return. In fact, workers reported to cultivate land for their own consumption, either parallel to their informal employment, or through family members, either parents, or brothers. In a few cases workers reported to share accommodation with their enlarged family - not only with parents but often also with siblings and their families. There were always members of the households attending to the land, even if all respondents highlighted that what obtained via subsistence farming was not enough to cover the family's nutritional needs. It was a subsidy to overall food consumption. One respondent reported leasing the land for sharecropping instead, obtaining some subsidy to his informal wage.

Responses on the effect of COVID-19 were asked tangentially and carefully, as it revealed to be a triggering question for many respondents, who struggled to carry out work during lockdown. However it emerged that land is likely to have also played a role in survival during the lockdown periods where one could only go out a few times a week to perform work. Indeed, those who did not have land did not have a safety when COVID-19 hit and reduced work opportunities. One of the two landless workers we interviewed, whom we reached via phone, and who reported to work as an autorickshaw driver, answered our call in Ranchi, in Jharkhand, where he out-migrated for work immediately after the lockdown was lifted. As he could not sustain and complement his informal activity with some subsistence farming, he had to once again

seek work outside his village. Through workers' narratives, land emerged as still playing a reproductive role in sustaining livelihoods, even if in the form of a marginal subsidy to informal work and life in the village. In this sense, farming and informal work shall not be interpreted necessarily as alternative income generating strategies.

6. Labour transitions and workers' lifecycle: policy implications for decent work

Findings from this study on post-industrial work trajectories and experiences of former garment workers returning to Bihar from the NCR provide some important policy implications. In particular, they suggest the need to adopt a *life-cycle approach* to evaluate the merits of some typologies of employment *across time,* and not simply during temporary phases in the lives of the working poor. In other words, the evaluation of the impact of given employment experiences should not only focus on static indicators like take-home wages or benefits during a limited period of the employment, but also consider the opportunities and possibilities subsequently open to workers during labour transitions into other forms of work, a sort of continuum of small movements (often back and forth) during a labouring life cycle. In the case we explored, garment work neither provided key life-changing opportunities to workers, nor it can be understood as the Lewisian turning point, given that workers moved out of industrial work after a relatively short period of time. Former garment workers reported lack of savings; in fact they also reported lack of significant remittances during the factory employment period. Given the well-known harsh and depleting rhythms characterising the garment industry, in India and elsewhere, and in the absence of significant savings, one does wonder if 5-10 years of strenuous work in NCR garment factories whilst living in housing environment like Kapashera are ultimately worth their likely toll on workers' body, health and *time*.

After they left the industry and the NCR, these migrant workers returned home to perform varied informal occupations. Some of these occupations were the same that their family members left behind in Bihar continued engaging in, on the basis of caste-ties. Others work opportunities instead were new, and materialised thanks to other social networks, based on caste, communityF or other solidarities. We cannot nor we should attempt to interpret different options too functionally. However, one can broadly conclude that across the majority of cases, the household micro-economy back home provided workers with some key safety nets and alternatives to move away from garment work. The relevance of land, even in its marginal reproductive role in sustaining livelihoods, seems instead to be the most common trope emerging from workers' narratives. However, rather than representing an alternative strategy in itself, subsistence farming emerged here as a subsidiary form of income support in the context of a collective strategy at family survival. Notably, this finding also confirms how the partial dispossession characterising migratory industrial working classes in India reproduces 'the village economy' as performing a key role in their sustenance, daily and regenerational care (Shah and Lerche, 2020), whilst also enabling the externalisation of reproductive costs away from industrial employers or the state (Mezzadri, 2019; 2020).

These considerations have implications for the decent work agenda. In a convincing critique of the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) approach to work, Rai et al (2019) illustrate the limitations of approaches to decent work that do not include any consideration for reproductive work. Revealing the contradictions between SDG 5, centred on gender and reproductive work, and SDG 8, focused instead on employment and decent work, the authors highlight how conceptualisations of decent work excluding reproductive activities *de facto* embrace a growth-centred development

agenda that is narrow and reinforces the invisibility of unpaid contributions within households and those who perform it; mostly women. Based on our findings, we can scale up this argument further. Firstly, our understandings of what constitutes decent work should not be based on static comparisons between work experiences, like mere differences in take-home wages, for instance. If acknowledging the relevance of reproductive work is crucial, so is highlighting the *broader reproductive structure* in which specific employment experiences take place. This means analysing the benefits and/or depleting effect of given forms of employment in the context of broader *life-cycles* of workers, also considering opportunities towards labour transitions based on assets, skills or savings accumulated. In short, effective approaches to decent work should also account for the overall *broader reproductive potential* and implications of specific forms of work.

Secondly, and relatedly, industrial and informal work should not be conceived as two separate alternative work routes for working classes in the Global South, to be assessed one against the other. There are strong interplays between the two, and many industrial workers engage in informal work upon leaving industries. The broader temporal reproductive trajectories of working classes entail complex interplays between both types of work, as it entails interplays with marginal farming, in context where partial dispossession from land is the norm.

Whilst this great reproductive complexity represents a clear challenge to possible novel theorisations of decent work, it does suggest the need to steer policy debates towards the adoption of more significant indicators of social impact of labouring experiences, which may include remittances, savings, care, and reproductive opportunities for the future. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has currently re-centred policy debates in this direction, by underlining the relevance of social reproduction and a 'caring

economy' (Care Collective, 2021; Women Budget Group, 2021) to support sustainable livelihoods in a post-pandemic world. Arguably, this process may offer greatly valuable avenues to rethink the decent work agenda in ways that may prioritise the long-term reproductive needs of working classes. In countries where welfare states do not guarantee pension contributions to their workers, who move back and forth across different forms of employment and experience multiple forms of labour transitions in their lives, moving the policy debate from static to dynamic, life-cycle based gains from employment experiences appears paramount.

6. Conclusions

This article is the result of a two-year research project focusing on the post-industrial work trajectories of former garment workers who left the NCR to return to their place of origin, in Bihar. It entailed a complex and time-consuming methodology, which implied identifying leaving workers from the industrial hamlet of Kapashera, and tracing them back home along the NCR-Bihar corridor. Through a combination of semi-quantitative questionnaires and life history collection, we managed to reconstruct some of the salient features of workers' industrial experience in the NCR, including their reasons for leaving, memories of industrial employment, assessment of the difference between past and present livelihoods, and contemporary life and work trajectories. Given the small size of our sample and the complex management of a difficult process of fieldwork taking place during various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, we see this exercise as providing initial input to what we hope can become a far broader conversation on labour transitions across formal and informal employment domains and their interplays in the lives of working classes in the Global South.

Yet, despite their limitations, we do believe that our findings suggest the methodological relevance of adopting a *life-cycle* approach to labour transitions. This approach entails assessing employment experiences and their outcome against the broader spatial and temporal reproductive canvas in which they take place. It rejects dualist understandings of formal and informal employment as entirely separate trajectories to be assessed one against the other, given their entanglement in the lives of working classes in the Global South. Notably, such rejection is embedded into a wider theoretical rejection of the Lewis model as a meaningful model to capture employment movements in labour surplus economies. In fact, one could argue that our findings - and workers' narratives in particular - fully reveal the reasons underlining the possibility for a souring of the Lewisian dream; namely, the circularity of labour transitions across industrial and non-industrial (informal) sectors, in contexts of only partial land dispossession. This issue is increasingly stressed also in urban studies focusing on slums and informal work (see RoyChowdhury, 2021). Notably, these considerations have also implications for the ways in which we should re-centre theorisations of decent work, against productivist assessments mainly linked to comparisons in static indicators of employment performance like, for instance, take-home wages alone.

With specific reference to the garment industry and its workings in India, we can draw two implications from our empirical findings. First, workers' responses and narratives seem to confirm once again the extremely precarious nature of employment in the sector. In fact, specifically, workers' testimonies identify labour contracting and high reproductive expenses in industrial hamlets as one of the key reasons behind their difficult experience in the NCR; their inability to save and, ultimately, their decision to leave. Upon leaving, workers return to their villages and find work in alternative

informal occupations shaped by caste or other social network networks. However, for the majority, land continues to play a crucial role in supporting daily and intergenerational, individual and collective reproduction. Once again, this confirms the need to reject frameworks theorising employment experiences as entirely different alternatives or trajectories, and studying labour transitions and their entanglements as distinct moments/movements in wider reproductive livelihood strategies. Much needed novel policy lessons can be derived from this holistic approach centred on work and social reproduction.

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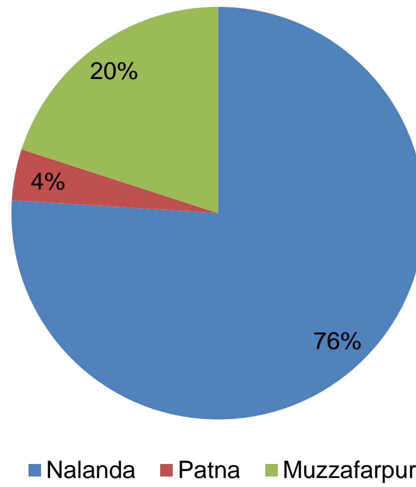
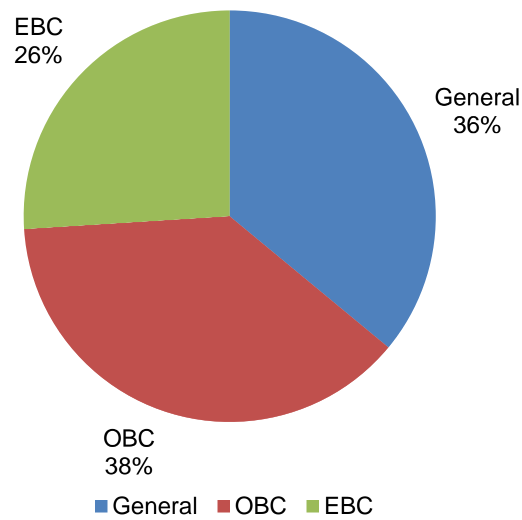
Graphs and Tables

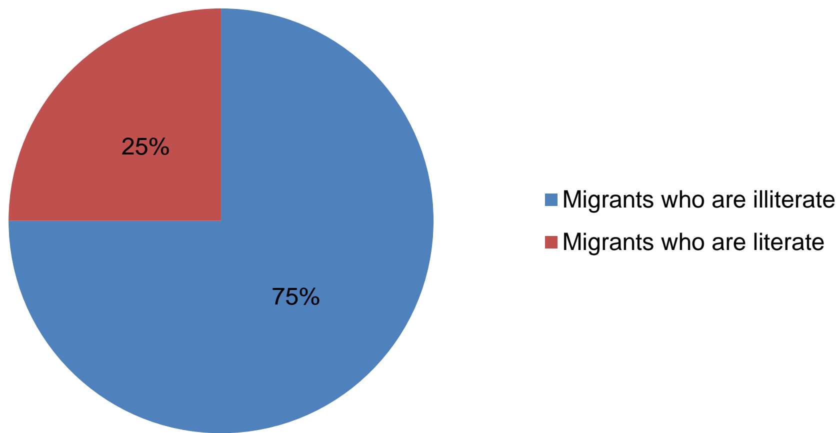
Graph 1. Respondent Distribution by Districts in Bihar



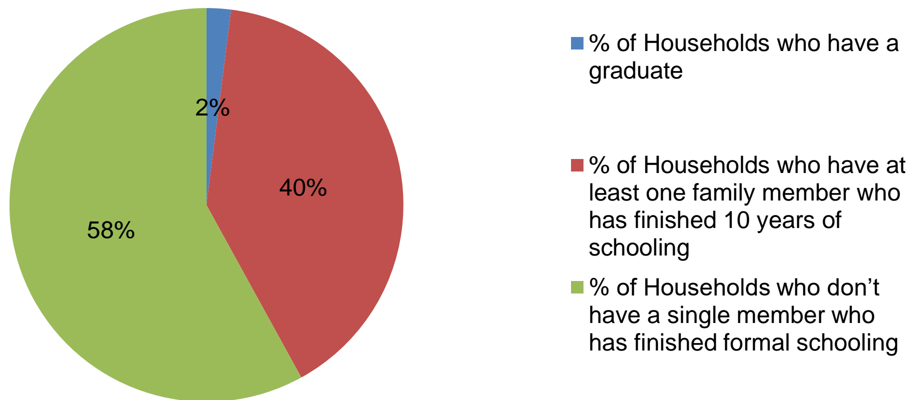
Graph 2. Respondents Castewise Distribution



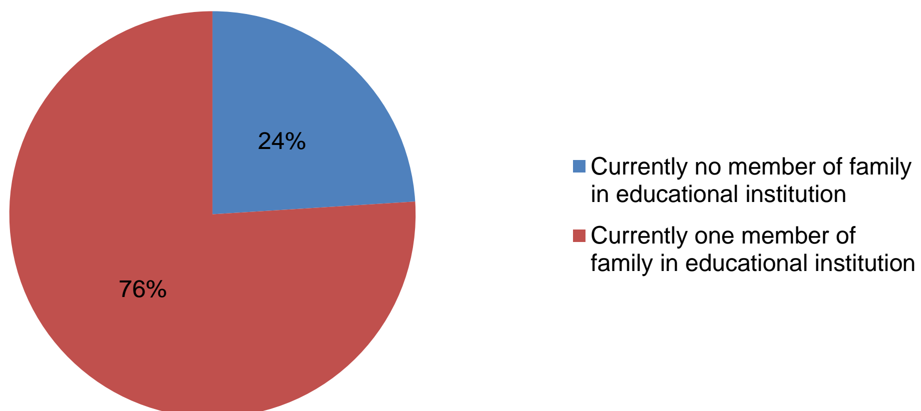
Graph 3. Migrant Literacy profile



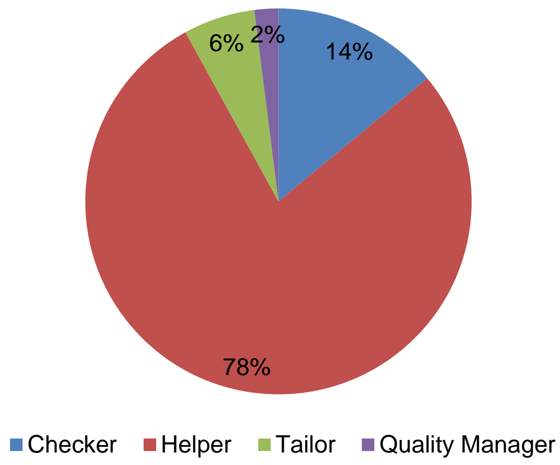
Graph 4. Literacy distribution by Households



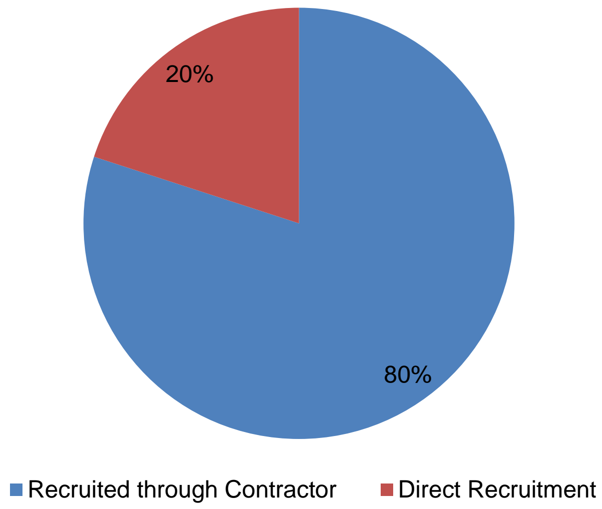
Graph 5. Households with one member currently in school



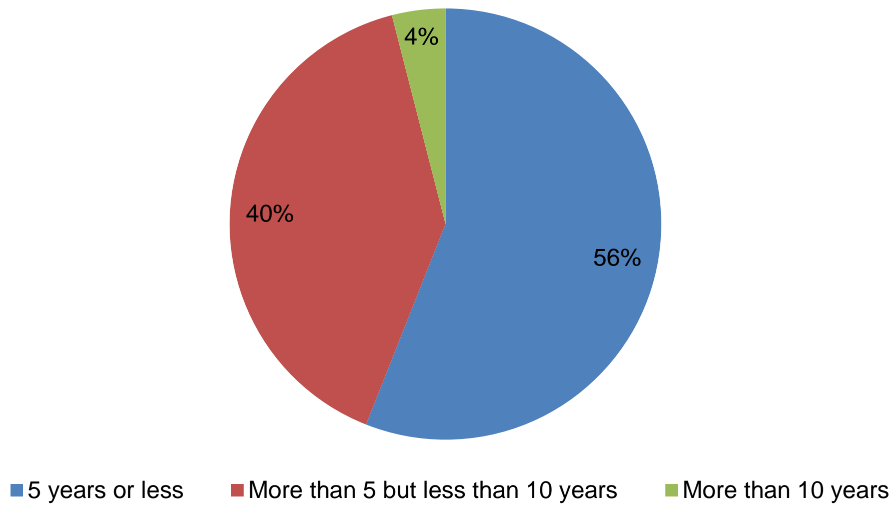
Graph 6. Respondents by Type of Work



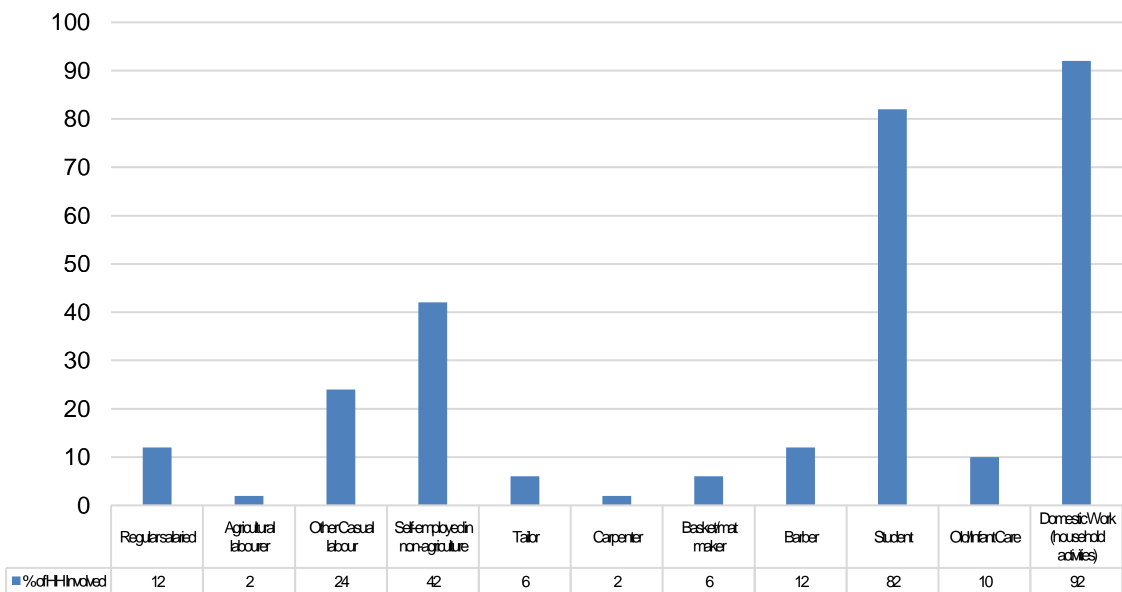
Graph 7. Recruitment process



Graph 8. Number of years worked in garment industry

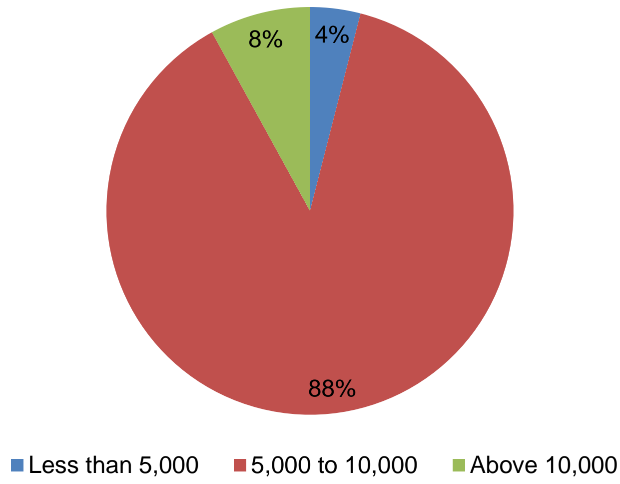


Graph 9. Distribution of Household Members by Primary Occupation

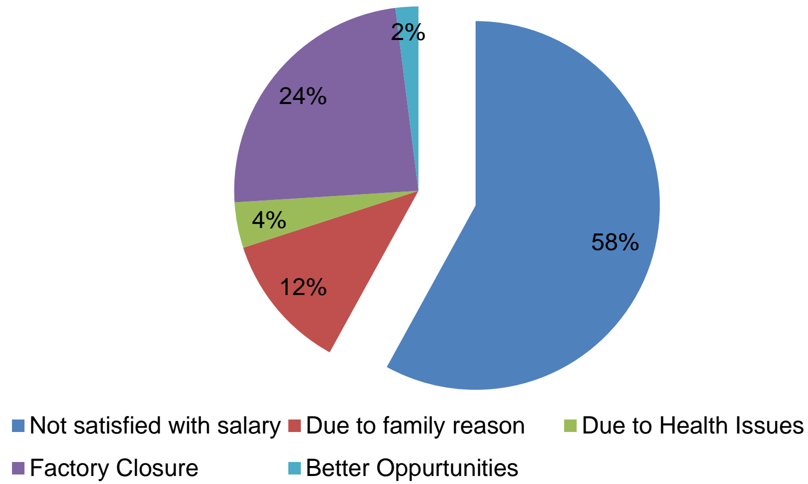


*Graph 9 shows primary occupation of at least one family member.

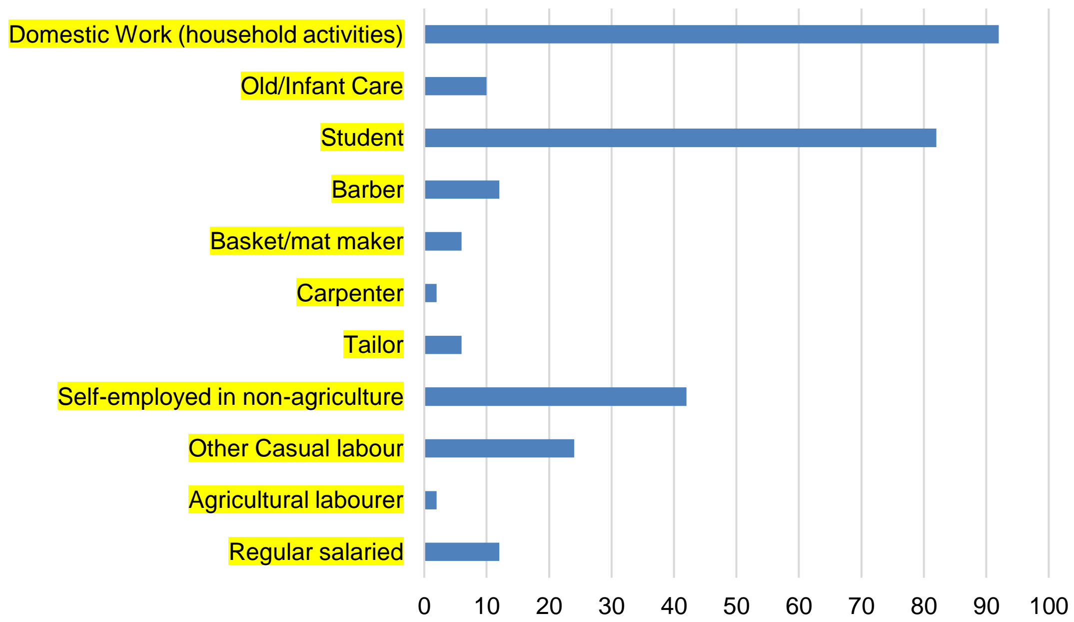
Graph 10. Monthly Income in Garment Industry



Graph 11. Reasons for leaving the Garment Industry



Graph 12. Post-Industrial Livelihoods



Graph 13. Earnings during and after industrial work

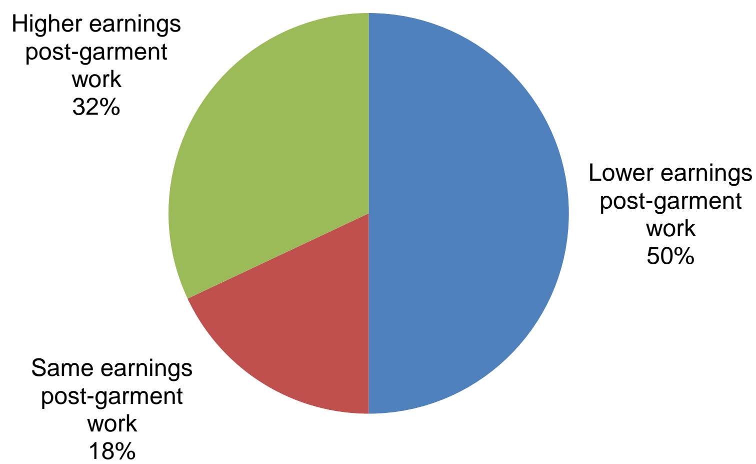
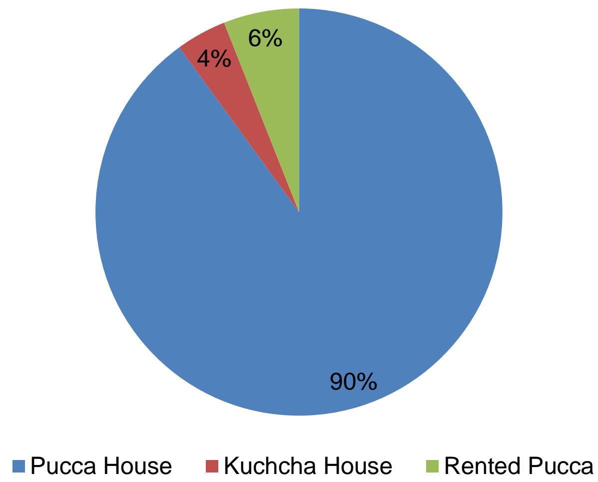


Table 1: Afterlife Livelihood, Garment Earnings and Afterlife earnings

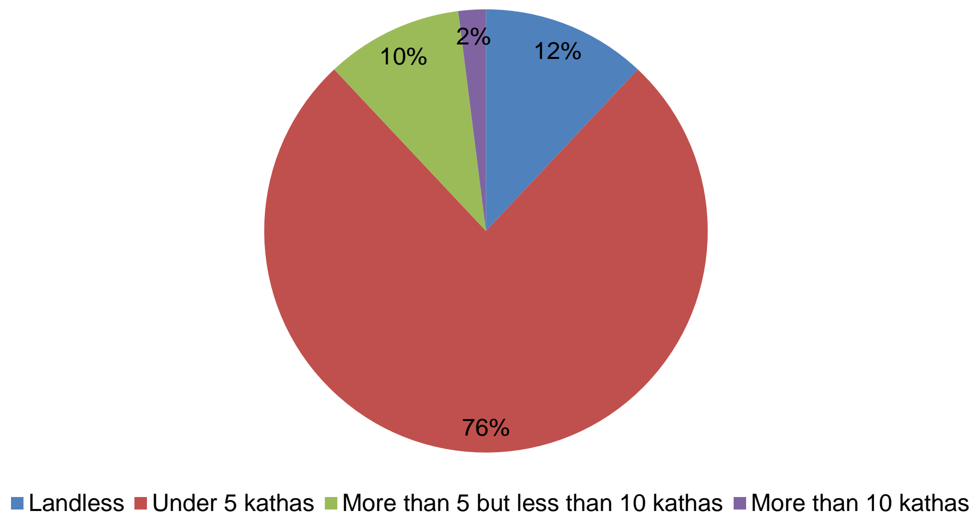
Former worker	Post-Industrial Livelihood	Garment wages (INR)	Post-Industrial Income (INR)
Satish S.	Barber	7000	6000-8000
Balmiki S.	Barber	8000	6000-8000
Sanjay S.	Barber	7000	6000-8000
Dev S.	Security guard	8000	7000
Balmiki Y.	Labour (agriculture)	5000	300-400 /day
Vikas S.	Barber	8000	6000-8000
Shankar S.	Self employed	8000	9000
Parwesh K.	Quality Manager	22000	32000
Ranjeet K.	Nurse	8000	8000
Md M.	Tailor	12000	15000
Md P.	Tailor	12000	15000
Jagdish S.	Auto Driver	7000	12000
Ajeet K.	Labour (construction)	7000	300-400 /day
Sunil K.	Labour (construction & agriculture)	8000	300-400 /day
Meera D.	Housewife	6000	n.a
Ravi R.	Self-employed	7000	7000
Md I.	Labour (construction)	6000	300-400 /day
Anil S.	Labour (construction & agriculture)	8000	300-400 /day
Deepak K.	Self-employed	12000	15000
Suman K.	Self-employed	6000	10000
Pintu K.	Toto (Rikshaw)	7000	400-500 daily
Raj K.	Labour (construction)	7000	300-400 /day
Mukesh K.	Labour (construction)	8000	300-400 /day
Rakesh K.	Icecream seller & agricultural labour	7000	300-400 /day
Ajay K.	Kirana Store	9000	7000 -8000
Sunil S.	Barber	6000	6000-7000
Chote T.	Barber	4000	6000-7000
Samindar R.	Labour (construction)	6000	300-400 /day

Md Iq	Pan-shop seller	7000	3000-4000
Md D.	Tailor	8000	7000 -8000
Md N.	Bidi-maker	6000	200-300
Md Z.A.	Casual labour and Bidi-maker	7000	200-300
Raju K.	Fruit-Seller	8000	7000 -8000
Deepak K.	Shop-seller	7000	5000-6000
Sudha D.	Bidi-maker	6000	200-250
Ganga P.	Labour (construction & agriculture)	7000	300-400 /day
Birendra K.	Tea-stall	8000	3000-4000
Mithlesh P.	Toto (Rikshaw)	6000	400-500 daily
Pramod K.	Security guard	8000	6000
Jogendra S.	Shop-seller	7000	3000-4000
Farman A.	Shop-seller	6000	5000-6000
Md Sahim	Medicine supplier	6000	7000 -8000
Abdul H.	Pvt School Teacher	8000	6000
Md Moin	Shop-seller	7000	5000-6000
Md Irfan	Shop-seller	6000	5000-6000
Md Sabze	Casual labour	6000	300-400 /day
Md A.	Pvt Job	8000	5000-6000
Nazre A.	Shop-seller	6000	5000-6000
Zishan A.	Fruits merchant	6000	15000
Arshad A.	Shop-seller	6000	5000-6000

Graph 14. Respondents by House type



Graph 15. Respondent Distribution by Landholding



Graph 16. Respondents distributed by BPL and APL cards