

Broken by the Outbreak: The Unemployment Crisis in Tamil Nadu during Lockdown

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I Introduction

The unemployment rate in India has risen from under 7 per cent before the start of the pandemic in mid-March to 23.5 per cent in April, while it continued to remain high at around 24 per cent in May. During April, India's unemployment rate shot up 23.5 per cent amid coronavirus lockdown. State-wise unemployment rate differed widely. The highest unemployment rate of 75.8 per cent was recorded in Puducherry followed by 49.8 per cent in Tamil Nadu 47.1 per cent in Jharkhand 46.6 per cent in Bihar and 43.2 per cent in Haryana. The lowest unemployment rate of 2.2 per cent was recorded in Himachal Pradesh followed by Sikkim (2.3 per cent), Punjab (2.9 per cent), Chhattisgarh (3.4 per cent), Telangana (6.2 per cent) and Uttarakhand (6.5 per cent).¹

The urban areas across the country were dotted with red zones due to the escalation of COVID-19 positive cases and these areas have reported 29.22 per cent unemployment rate while the rural areas have been at 26.16 per cent. Urban areas had 23.5 per cent of unemployment on April 2020 which is higher than the unemployment in rural India.²

2 Objectives and Methodology of the study

- To understand the adverse impact of the lockdown
- To assess the reason for the unemployment issues rose during the lockdown period
- To suggest the remedial measures to the income losers to come out from their livelihood loss

The review of various documents such as Newspapers, articles, e-journals, interaction with experts, case studies, interviewed the affected persons were the different methodology adopted for this study (the names are not disclosed as per the wish of some case study respondents)

3 Unemployment in Urban India

The unemployment from February 2020 to April 2020 in all the states has proliferated due to lockdown. Currently, every fourth person in India is unemployed, revealed the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy revealed in its unemployment data that every fourth person in India is unemployed³. Due to ongoing nationwide lockdown, the unemployment rate had been above 20 per cent for over

¹ Chitranjan Kumar, "India's weekly unemployment rate soars to 24.3% amid coronavirus lockdown: CMIE", Business Today, 26 May 2020

² <https://thefederal.com/covid-19/lockdown-impact-every-fourth-person-in-india-is-unemployed/>

³ <https://thefederal.com/covid-19/lockdown-impact-every-fourth-person-in-india-is-unemployed/>

two months now. Even as relaxations in lockdown were announced, restarting the rural economy did not seem to have made any dent in the unemployment in the country. However, the unemployment rate in Puducherry and Tamil Nadu is the highest among all the states. Tamil Nadu which is known for its decentralized development is severely affected without sparing any major cities.

Table 1: State-wise status of unemployment in Urban India for Feb – Apr'20

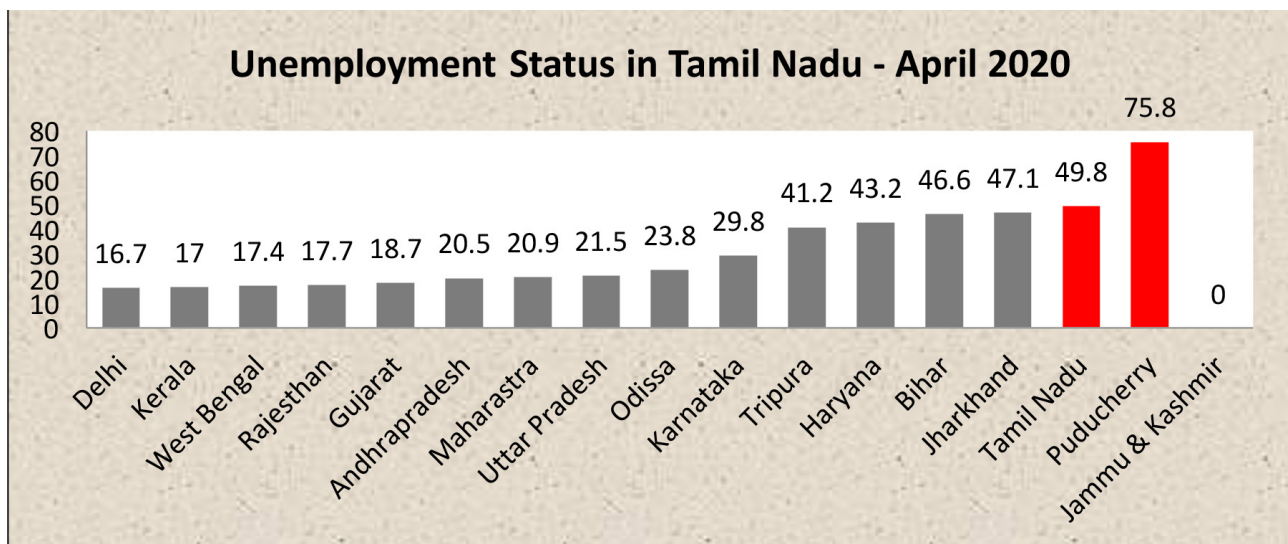
State/UT	Feb'20	Mar'20	Apr'20
Andhra Pradesh	5.8	5.7	20.5
Assam	4.4	4.8	11.1
Bihar	10.3	15.4	46.6
Chhattisgarh	8.4	7.7	3.4
Delhi	14.8	17	16.7
Goa	2.8	5.2	13.3
Gujarat	6.4	6.7	18.7
Haryana	25.8	25.1	43.2
Himachal Pradesh	16.8	18.8	2.2
Jammu & Kashmir	22.2	15.5	NA
Jharkhand	11.9	8.2	47.1
Karnataka	3.6	3.5	29.8
Kerala	7.6	9	17
Madhya Pradesh	4.6	2.2	12.4
Maharashtra	4.7	5.8	20.9
Meghalaya	3.6	1.6	10
Odisha	3.1	13.1	23.8
Puducherry	1.8	1.2	75.8
Punjab	10.9	10.3	2.9
Rajasthan	15.1	11.8	17.7
Sikkim	NA	23.6	2.3
Tamil Nadu	2.1	6.3	49.8
Telangana	8.3	5.8	6.2
Tripura	28.4	29.9	41.2
Uttar Pradesh	9	10.1	21.5
Uttarakhand	5.3	19.9	6.5
West Bengal	5	6.9	17.4
India	7.8	8.7	23.5

4 Unemployment in Tamil Nadu

Since Tamil Nadu is the fastest-growing urbanized state, the unemployment rate has been highest in all the districts of Tamil Nadu. According to the 2011 census data, Tamil Nadu tops the list of urbanized states with 48.45% of its population living in urban areas⁴. If more than 75% of the male population employed in non-agricultural occupation is classified as urban areas in the census 2011.

Closure of Tamil Nadu's vibrant labour-intensive micro, small and medium enterprises since March 25th left a majority of workers without any employment. Tamil Nadu is among the few states which has more number of non-agricultural workers in their economies. This could be the main reason for the unemployment rate increases in the past month in Tamil Nadu, said Professor Vijayabaskar of Madras Institute of Development Studies⁵. As most of the people were occupied in non-agricultural activity mainly MSMEs, hence Tamil Nadu has no way to escape from being the worst affected state in terms of unemployment. The states in which the unemployment rate is higher than 16 % are shown in the graph below.

Figure 1: Unemployment Status in Tamil Nadu – April 2020



Source: <https://thefederal.com>

4.1 Development paradigm of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is one of the most rapidly industrializing and urbanizing states and is the third most urbanized state in the country in India, with 48.45 per cent of its population living in urban areas. By 2030, Tamil Nadu will be the most urbanized state with 67 per cent of its population living in urban areas⁶. An even spread of small, medium and major towns, migration of people from rural areas in search of employment and the presence of industrial estates in all districts contributed to speedy urbanization of Tamil Nadu⁷.

Since historically large parts of the Tamil Nadu depended on rain-fed agriculture, the textile industry, particularly the handloom industry, was very much part of economic activities in rural areas to augment income. Former IAS officer and urban planner M.G. Devasahayam said even a small district like Kanyakumari with a strong rural background and agricultural lands has seen the

⁴ B. Sivakumar, "Census 2011: Tamil Nadu 3rd most urbanized state", The Times of India, July 20, 2011

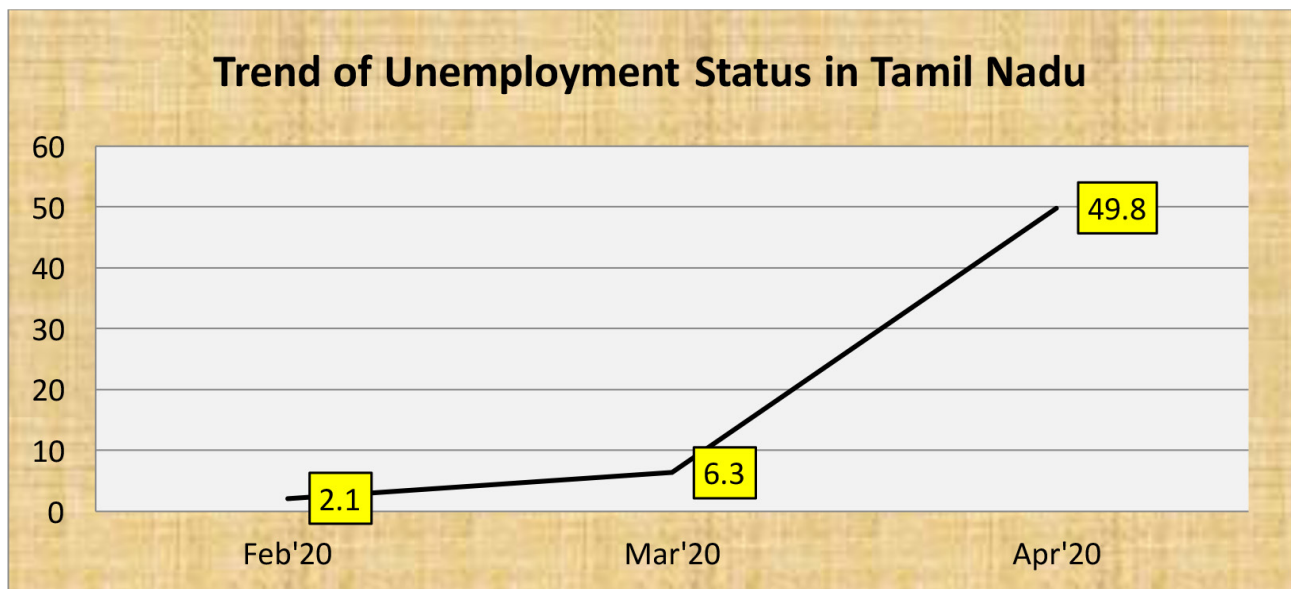
⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/lockdown-double-whammy-for-tamil-nadu/articleshow/75526070.cms>

⁶ Deccan Chronicle, 4 July 2017

⁷ The Hindu, 1 April 2016

emergence of small towns due to infrastructure facilities. “In Tamil Nadu, the Industrial Estates conceived during the Congress government headed by Kamaraj spurred economic activities in all districts that gradually paved way for creation of small towns,” he said⁸. It has resulted in a wider space creation for more employment in Non-farming sectors in Tamil Nadu which has been paralyzed during Covid-19 in the state.

Figure: 2: Trend of Unemployment Status in Tamil Nadu for Feb-Apr'20



Source: <https://thefederal.com>

From 2.1 % unemployment in Tamil Nadu in February 2020, there has been a spike to 49.8% within a couple of months due to pandemic. Every facet of both organized and unorganized sectors has come to a standstill due to the lockdown. This study analyses the adverse impact of the virus in the context of losing employment due to the sudden lockdown as the government gives more priority to life than the livelihood.

5 Sectors affected

As discussed earlier, both the organized and unorganized sectors are vehemently affected during the lockdown period. The government's abrupt decision of curfew followed by the lockdown is not only made many people strand but also compelled thousands to lose their income within a day of the announcement. As per this study, it is understood that many sectors are crippled. The MSME is the major organized sector contributing to the employment of lakh of poor in the state. It was the first sector drastically caused for unemployment of several thousand poor Tamilians. This study focused on the unemployment issues in following major organized, service and unorganized sectors:

Organized

- Fishing Industry, Poultry, Firecracker, Granite, Textile, Automobile, I.T,

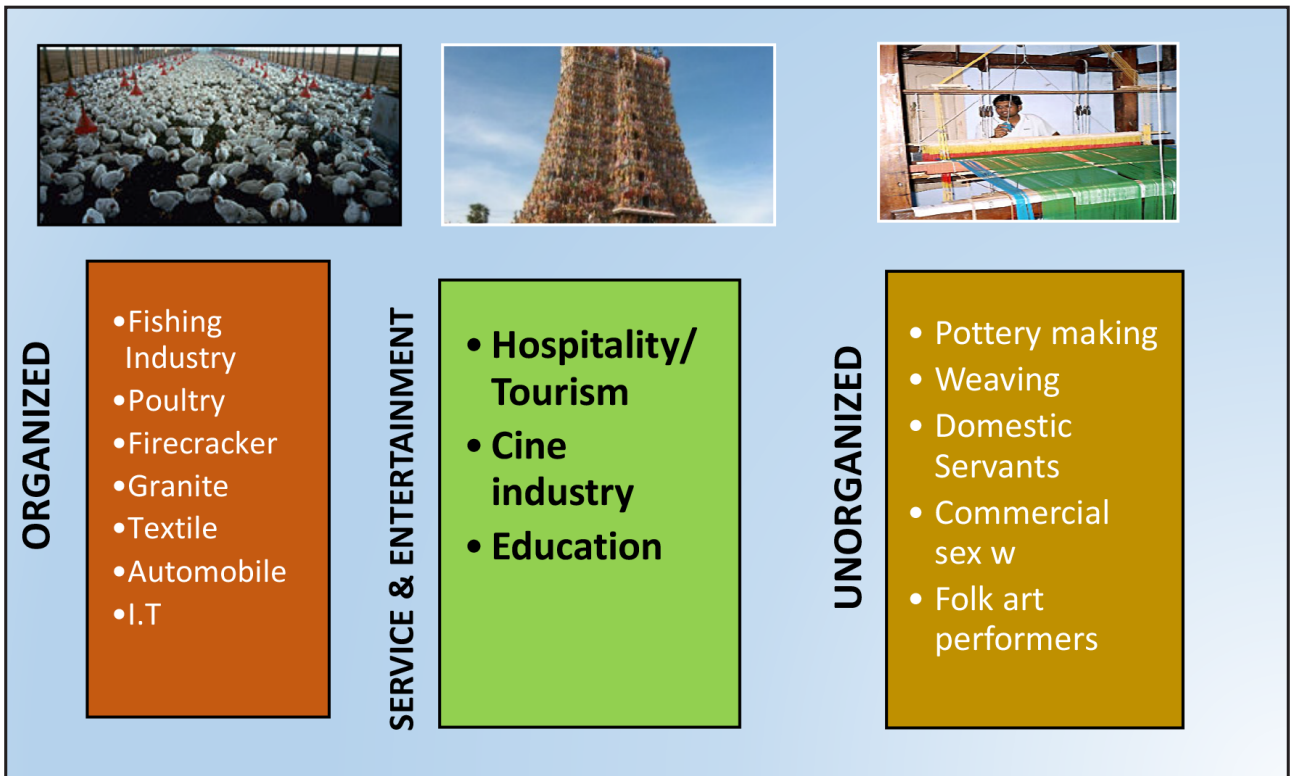
Service and entertainment sectors

- Hospitality/Tourism, Cine industry & Education,

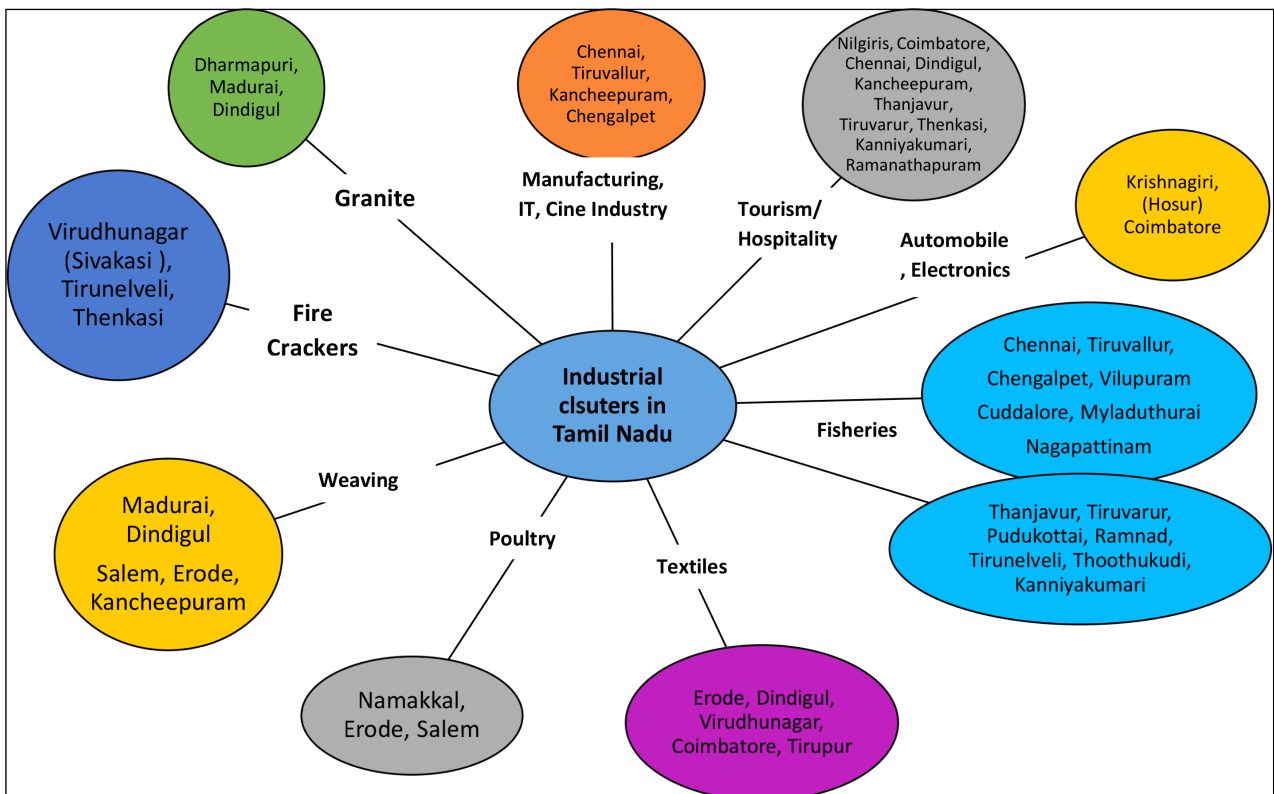
Unorganized sectors

- Pottery making, Weaving, Domestic Servants, Commercial sex workers, Folk art performers,

Figure 3: Sectors affected



Unlike other states, Tamil Nadu is a decentralized state, hence almost all the district capital cities are well developed with non-farming sectors. The decentralized development caused the unemployment issue in all the major districts of Tamil Nadu. The districts with the major industries impacted due to the lockdown are depicted here.



5.1 Fishing Industry

The total fish production in Tamil Nadu was estimated at 712,000 tons during 2017-18. Tamil Nadu was ranked fourth in the total fish production of the country. It exported 88,257 metric tons of marine products and earned foreign exchange of Rs 4,341.78⁹ crore. The closedown of the markets directly hit the fishing industry which is one the major livelihood of around 4.5 million people in 14 coastal districts (out of 37 districts) of Tamil Nadu.

Though fish was considered as one of the essentials in the Government list, fishermen were not able to market their catch as restaurants and the markets were not opened for days together. Chennai, Kanyakumari, Thoothukudi, Rameswaram and Pudukottai districts usually sell 100-200 tons of fish every day. Though South India Fishermen Welfare Association requested for permission to at least fibre boats to venture into the sea, citing Puducherry and Kerala as an example where fishing was allowed with reasonable restrictions, the permission was denied without considering the livelihood problem of the fishermen.

“The Government allowed the movement of vegetables, milk and even fish feed inland farms, but marine fishing was not allowed these double standards discriminate the fishing industry”, lamented Father Churchill, who was the president of Tamil Nadu fishermen welfare society, a registered NGO working for the welfare of fishermen.

5.2 Poultry

Poultry farming is one of the worse-hit sectors among the disrupted small and medium businesses suffered substantial economic loss. Total 12.08 crore of poultry population in 2019 keeps Tamil Nadu at the top in poultry population in the country.

Whenever there is an epidemic spread, the non-vegetarian food industry becomes immediately affected as rumours spread that epidemic would spike through the non-vegetarian food. Namakkal district is known for its poultry hub where thousands of chicken and lakhs of eggs are sent to the neighbouring states such as Karnataka and Kerala. Namakkal poultry industry is already incurred a heavy loss due to the outbreak of avian flu.

The COVID-19 also further intensified the irrational fear that chicken would spread the virus. Despite continuous announcements from the government and food scientists about the baseless rumour that eating chicken or egg can cause the virus to spread, the people abandoned poultry products. One kilo of broiler kitchen which was sold at Rs 180 during normal days has drastically scaled down to Rs 80 during the lockdown. There was no customer for eggs and an egg which was normally sold for Rs 4 did not find buyers to buy even for even Rs 2. The poultry farmers said that they have never seen such a business downturn in the past 15 years. More than Rs 100 crore business was lost in April 2020 and the loss keeps increasing.

Case Study: I - Transportation to the eggs

Mr Ponram runs an egg storage facility. He opined that this facility is conducive for the big farmers who produce lakhs of eggs and storing more than a month is not advisable. The small traders cannot afford this facility. However, many small farmers livelihood depend on the regular sales of their farm eggs to the school administration. The students in the schools are provided with eggs along with their mid-day meals. The fear of spreading the virus through this food and closing down of the schools crashed egg sales. The poultry farmer want transport of their poultry products to the nearby states and an interest-free loan from the bank to strengthen their broken business.

⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/lockdown-in-tamil-nadu-fishermen-seek-relaxation-of-stringent-norms/articleshow/75535529.cms>

6 Manufacturing Sectors

6.1 Firecracker Industry



Over 1000 fireworks industries in Sivakasi of Virudhunagar district provide direct and indirect employment to eight lakh people and account for the manufacture of 90 per cent of the firecrackers production in the country¹⁰.

Eight lakh people became jobless due to lockdown. The closing of those industries had a downward effect on the economy of Virudhunagar district. Thousands of people depend on the firecracker and allied industries such as logistics, packing and printing. Most of the workers are women whose income is a major source for their family's

livelihood. These women normally earn Rs 300 to Rs 500 per day. The lockdown forced these women to borrow money from the local money-lenders who charge high interest.

Now they lost their employment and many religious festivals would take place during the summer days in which huge amount of firecrackers would be used. However, the ban on religious congregations and festivals, these industries faced irreparable loss during the lockdown. Even after the lockdown, the chance for workers will not get employed due to the decline in demand. Fifty per cent of their orders come from foreign countries during May and June for the *Deepavali* celebration. The orders stand cancelled this year and their income can be generated only next May until there is no answer for their question about their livelihood.

6.2 Granite and Textile Yarn Industry

The granite and textile yarn industries were not spared by the coronavirus outbreak. More than half of their products would be exported to the eastern countries, which was vehemently struck by the lockdown. China is a big market for Tamil Nadu granite stones but now there is no demand as per Mr Veeramani, Chairman of Gem Granites. Most of the granites industries run with bank loans. This lockdown severely dropped the regular loan repayment. Since the moratorium on interest payment was requested and further expected that the RBI direct the Banks not to treat non-payment of interest as bad loans so that banks can continue to lend for working capital which is the crucial need of the hour¹¹.

Tamil Nadu chapter of the confederation of Indian Industry requested for lower electricity tariffs, reduction in import duty on key inputs such as chemical dyes, resins and non-woven fabric to resume the work of the yarn industry otherwise the lockdown would force for a permanent closure of the industry which gives employment to thousands of workers.

6.3 Textile industry

Tirupur is known for its organized and unorganized companies. It has 1500 exporting companies and thousands of smaller supply chain units. The payments got stuck during the lockdown period, and around Rs 5000 crore was to be realized from the buyers within a couple

¹⁰ <https://www.newsclick.in/silenced-lives-firecracker-workers-sivakasi>

¹¹ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/granite-textile-yarn-industries-badly-hit-by-covid-19/article31083370.ece>

of months. Rs 2500 crore worth orders were not yet delivered. These vigorously resulted in the unemployment of more than six lakh employees. They are mostly daily wagers who earn Rs 450 per day but their income became a distant dream during the lockdown days. Paradoxically, the textile industry which is an organized sector has more number of unorganized migrant workers.

6.4 Migrant Workers -the Unorganized in the organized sector

A survey conducted in 2016 explained that Tamil Nadu had 10.67 lakhs of migrant workers¹². Among them, 27% work in manufacturing, 14% in cotton and textile industries and 11.41% work in construction industries and few percentage work in movie theatres, shopping malls, restaurants, Gyms, bars, spas and hotels. More than 51% of the migrants reside at Chennai, Kanchipuram and Tiruvallur districts where Coronavirus impact was heavy. Many migrant workers moved to Tirupur with a dream of having a decent life after some years of their savings.

These migrants already suffer from long working hours, forced employment, hazardous workplace, violence, exploitation and not linked with social security schemes. However, the lockdown made them forget their long term issues and replaced them with hunger, starvation, without cash, loan. Most of the migrants are illiterate and do not know the local language, hence they found difficult to assess government schemes like the free train service to their home town etc.

As per the government statistics 4 lakh migrant workers were stranded in Tamil Nadu¹³. Since their current employers do not want to lose their migrant workers, they confiscated their Aadhaar card and not sending them. They were not paid during the lockdown period. The death of the migrant workers due to hunger, excess heat during their train journey to their home town created a lot of mental agony among the stranded migrant workers. Some migrant workers who came to Tamil Nadu, believing the promises of contracts are abandoned by them. They belong to the shadow labour economy that gets paid in cash, without the safety net of Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance and no employment identity card¹⁴. The lack of documentation about the profile of the migrant workers is another issue and the government has not appointed any district-level staff to look after the nightmare of the migrant workers.

Case Study 2: Dream abandoned

Sheza (name changed) was a migrant worker from Arunachal Pradesh, who was working in the garment industry, Tirupur. She painfully explained that her dream was to own a house in her native village. But her husband is an alcoholic and abandoned her with her children by eloping with another woman. She realized that her dream could be materialized only through her hard work. She migrated to Tirupur with the dream and started saving money. Her dreams, however, ground to a halt when the central government announced a nationwide lockdown on 24 March, to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The garment factory was closed and she got her payment only in April. She realized that she would die out starvation if she did not go back to her native village. She said that at least she can get vegetable from the forest nearby her village but everything is costlier in Tirupur and nothing can be done without money.

She was not able to get 5 kg of rice and 1 kg of Chana dal provided by the government as she did not have any identity card. At least other migrants had voter ID, but she could not because she hailed from Chakma community.

¹² <https://www.hindustamil.in/news/blogs/558029-migrant-workers-issues-and-solution.html>

¹³ The Hindu, 23th May 2020

¹⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/the-precariat-in-the-time-of-the-pandemic/article31507857.ece>

Chakma is an ethnic group. These people scattered across Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Assam. There are around a thousand Chakmas worked in Tirupur. They are also not escaped from lockdown plight.

Case Study 3: Identity (Card) crisis

A Chakma migrant who worked at a Garment factory, in Tirupur mournfully depicted that several Chakmas including women worked in the factory. They decided not to continue their employment until a normal situation returned as 114 positive cases were reported. However, their owner insisted they resume work despite the factory being located in the containment zone. When they declined, he was furious and beat up them, also disconnected the electricity and water to their residence. Though they took up the issue to the local police station, no help arrived as the police deliberately supported the owner too. When they approached government officials for relief aid, they were informed that they could not get aid as they did not have any identity card, not even voter ID.

Chakmas migrated from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in erstwhile East Pakistan in the 1960s, but many remained unrecognized in Indian electoral rolls. Chakmas were given voting rights in Arunachal Pradesh only in 2014. According to the latest records for the Bordumsa-Diyun region and Miao district, there are only 4,293 registered¹⁵.

Case Study 4: Spending the money saved

Jay (name changed) is an Assamese, migrated from a village near to Guwahati to Chennai. He was working at a restaurant in Chennai. He was very thankful to his employer as he provided food and shelter besides monthly wage. He regularly sent his age parents the money he earned every month. He had three sisters and his parents saved money for his sisters' marriage. But things went upside down once lockdown was announced. Since he has no money to survive, now his parents send him money from the savings. When he asked his parent to stop sending him money, his mother told him in tears that his life is too precious to marry off his sisters. He could not go back to his home town as other migrant workers did. He was eagerly waiting for the opening of the restaurant though knowing very well that the restaurant is located in the containment area and positive cases spike in Chennai¹⁶.

7 Services Sectors

7.1 Hospitality/ Tourism industry

Tamil Nadu has hundreds of pilgrimage destinations. The tourist inflow to Tamil Nadu temples always fillips the income of the state. Pilgrimage devotees and tourists are banned as the transport service is stopped and the temples remained closed for Darshans. Thousands of small vendors around the Meenakshi Temple, Madurai, Pragatheeswarar Temple, Thanjavur, Kamatachi temple, Kanchipuram, etc. lose their income and not sure how many months they need to wait for their regular income. It is believed that the tourism industry would take at least a year for revival.¹⁷

Tourism industry engages people who either work on short term contracts such as guides, parking contractors, cleaners in shops, waiters, cook and the housekeeping employees in restaurants, vegetable supplies, meat, flower supplies. The different workers namely auto rickshaw drivers, bus operators, travel agents, hoteliers, tour guides and vendors around the tourist destinations are severely affected. More than half of the tourism and hospitality industry would be sick with a possible loss of million jobs if the recovery in the industry stretches beyond October 2020.

¹⁵ https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/for-chakma-hajong-refugees-citizenship-strugglecontinues/articleshow/74033643.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

¹⁶ The identified of the respondent is retained confidential as per the request of the respondent

¹⁷ The Hindu, 27th May 2020

In recent years, the hotel and food industry saw an exponential growth in Tamil Nadu. The delay in the revival of the industry would severely impact thousands of small eateries. Even in post-lockdown, a sudden development in the tourism industry could not be visualized as the travel fares will rise. Moreover the maintenance of the vehicles like personal distancing, frequent disinfection will also contribute to the fare increase. The pandemic has changed the visa norms also which forced the travel agency to focus only on domestic tourism.

Case Study 5: Forgotten desires

Sundaresan is a travel vehicle driver. He is about 31 years old and desired to marry only after the construction of his own house. He saves money and purchased 3 cents of land last year. He readily collected all the required documents to apply for a housing loan in HDFC bank. The sudden lockdown locked his hope of constructing a house which forces him not to think about his marriage shortly.

He told “After government lifts the lockdown, People should first visit the tourist destinations with the confidence of safety and hygiene and starting staying at hotels and eat at restaurants. Since people may not prefer a long tour journey, the nearby lesser-known, untapped destinations should be promoted. These places should be maintained with adequate sanitation, disinfection and police personnel to ensure the physical distance. It may take months together for people to think about tourism, until then, I cannot think about my dream to come true. The lockdown shut the door of my dream’.

Ooty and Kodaikanal are hill stations in Tamil Nadu. April and May are the peak season for tourism as people from all over the states and from other states too would visit these places to escape from the scorching sun during summer days. The flower show in Ooty and Kodaikanal attracts lakhs of tourists from all over the world during summer vacation. The hotels, restaurants, resorts and vendors would keep their earning of April and May for the entire year but now not only their two months earning is gone, but their life in the remaining months also is threatened by this lockdown.

Each hill station would be visited at least 10 to 12 lakh tourists during these months¹⁸ which sustain the livelihood of hundreds of poor people which was lost this time. Even after the partial unlock down, Tourists will not be permitted to visit hill stations like Ooty and Kodaikanal, while the existing cap on the number of people participating in marriages and death ceremonies will continue, besides the shutting down of resorts¹⁹. This is the common case of thousands of taxi and bus tour operators, 200 tourist guides, several small business owners and street vendors who are dependent on the tourism industry to sustain their livelihoods.

Case Study 6: A Prolonged Wait

Valarmathi, a Coimbatore based graduate migrated to Ooty after her marriage. Since her husband gave a green signal to her ambition to be an entrepreneur, she availed loan from her self-help group to run an eatery. The eatery is very famous among the tourists who became the ambassadors of her delicious food. She regularly repaid her loan with the profit she earned from the eatery. These are all stories before the lockdown. But her eatery has been closed down for days together and she felt like penniless in the first time in her life. She said “what my husband earns for one year, I would earn within two months of the summertime. But this time I am not able to earn even a single rupee. This is not my story alone, around one lakh people were linked to the hotels and restaurants in the district. The lockdown not only stripped off my income but also pushed me off to be a loan defaulter. Even after normalcy comes back, I need to wait for the next summer to earn money and I don’t know what I can do with my loan repayment”.

¹⁸ The Hindu, 28th May 2020

¹⁹ <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/310520/no-unlockdown-for-tamil-nadu-until-june-30.html>

7.2 Tourism allied sectors

The temple cities in Tamil Nadu have thousands of small restaurants called “Mess”. These messes are very famous for their traditional, delicious food items. The food supply organizations such as Swiggy, Zomato etc. involved in delivering these small mess’s food items. However, the closure of the mess and the food supplying organizations stuck the restaurant business and many proprietors of deluxe hotels and lodges reluctant to pay their employees salary for the lockdown period. The shops around the temples protect the livelihood of thousand particularly women. Hundreds of women are involved in Pooja material production. The closure of the temples closed the doors of these women’s income also.

Case Study 7: Drifted Sumangalis

Radha is a Kungumam maker. She painfully uttered “when you enter any temple in the US, or Singapore you can see the red mark on the forehead of the devotees and suddenly you should remember us as our Kungumam are exported to those countries. The Thazhampoo Kungumam (Kungumam made by fragrant screw pine) is a famous Pooja item which was made by hundreds of women in Madurai. The visit to Meenakshi temple at Madurai would not be completed without buying the Kungumam. Lakhs of Kungumam packets would be sold on Goddess Meenakshi marriage in May.

The women devotees believe that if they buy Kungumam at the marriage, they live long as respectful sumangali (long life to their husbands). Work at home is a new phenomenon for those in the IT sector but our work is always at home only, hence our domestic work never gets affected and we earn an assured income, but now temple closure has resulted in almost no sale of Kungumam packets. Devotees visit God, but the devotees are our Gods, we are waiting for God to give darshan to the devotees so that our Gods resume their patronage”.

Though hundreds of women are involved in Kungumam making, they make it on a small scale and have not organized themselves. Non-government organizations can promote self-help groups or produces company so that they can benefit the government schemes.

7.3 Cine Industry



Cinema industry is one of the busiest industries as Tamil Nadu leads the race to have the largest number of cinema theatres in India with a total count of 745 cinema theatres²⁰. The employment in the cine industry is lucrative. If at all they are not able to succeed in cinema, the television media embraces thousands of media crew every year as the number of private television channels are proliferating day by day. Though their earning is attractive compared to other daily wagers, they are normally paid as per the man-days they work.

The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the Tamil film industry. Film shoot cancellations and postponement of movie releases amid the lockdown has put thousands of business at stake and rendered lakhs of film industry workers, mostly daily wage earners, indefinitely jobless²¹.

²⁰ <https://www.quora.com/Which-state-has-a-large-number-of-cinema-theatres-in-India>

²¹ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/variety/tamil-film-industry-theatres-reeling-from-pandemic-blow/article31296196.ece>

²² The Hindu, 1st June 2020

The closure of shooting for days together made a thousand of support artists decided to relocate to their native place after the deduction of the advance money they paid while occupying the house of rent.

Many film shoots including the mega cine stars like Rajinikanth and Ajith Kumar have been suspended due to the lockdown, rendering thousands of daily wage-earning technicians jobless²².

Case Study 8: Lay-off on Labours' day

The President of Chennai City Film Exhibitors Association, opined, "Even after the whole atmosphere is cleared, it will take minimum six months for theatres to recover business because people will be initially hesitant to go theatres and will prefer to watch movies at home. Theatre revenues have come to zero after the shutdown but expenses like minimum electricity charges and other maintenance charges have to be paid," hence the theatre owners would finally put their hand on the employees' salary.

On 1st May, the International labours' day, we heard that some cinema theatre workers such as project operators, booking clerk, security guards and parking clerks etc. are laid off. Though the efforts are made to ensure their income, the panic among the workers put them under heavy mental agony and distress. The releasing of the movies in online platforms and websites fuels their anxiety".

7.4 Education

Though the government school teachers are paid during the lockdown, Tamil Nadu has more than an equal number of private educational institutions. Normally the teachers at the private institutes are not paid on May due to summer vacation, their salary for March and April is also not certain. Around 12,000 part-time teachers are employed for meagre salary by the Tamil Nadu government. These teachers do not know when they would be called as the schools remain closed for more than three months.

8 Unorganised workers

8.1 Pottery Makers

The pandemic has affected at least 13,000 people earthenware industry in Tirunelveli and Tenkasi districts of Tamil Nadu. They have buyers from both domestic and abroad as pottery is an aesthetical replacement for plastic cups. Their bowls, bottles, jugs, micro oven friendly utensils are very popular in foreign countries but there are no takers which accumulated their stocks and no fresh orders. This industry already faces a severe shortage of skilled manpower as many youngsters do not want to take this skill from their fathers.

Case Study 9: Unexpected dependency

Mr. Munisamy was a pottery maker since he dropped out of his school studies. He involved in this profession for more than a half-century, Munisamy told "I would be involving in pottery making until I die, though my age-related ailments slow down my performance and my son's reluctant to continue our family profession. I could manage it with a couple of employees I hired. This lockdown scaled down my hope of resuming my business. I am not able to give salary for those two employees who have not developed any other skills to shift their employment. Although the government announces Rs 2000 relief for unorganized employees, 85% of us are not given the amount. This lockdown strengthens my son's desire to locking my work down permanently". There is no word to console the senior citizen who never expected anything from his son, now became a dependent.

8.2 Weaving

The handlooms weaving is one of the largest economic activities in Tamil Nadu employing 1.89 lakh weavers' households and about 3.19 lakh weavers. Tamil Nadu has the price for its unique handloom woven products like Silk and Cotton Sarees, Furnishing materials, dhoties, lungies and Towels. In Vellore alone, there are about 11000 looms which 10000 looms are covered under the Cooperative fold and the coverage works out to 90%.

Kanchipuram is known for its silk sarees all over the world. The tourists who come to visit the temples in Kanchipuram would always prefer to have a look at silk sarees and the lady tourists never escape from the temptation of buying that saree. Marriages in Tamil Nadu is not fulfilled with the attractive silk sarees worn by the bride in the marriage. On average, at least one lakh silk sarees are produced by these weavers every year. Kanchipuram earns Rs 500 to 1000 crore every year which was hit by the lockdown. However, the closure of the temples and silk sarees showrooms and restriction of participants in marriage parties drastically dropped the sale of silk sarees and abandoned those weavers²³.



Many handloom weavers from Madurai do not know how to bounce back as there is a severe shortage of raw material. The raw material such as thread spools normally comes from Surat and Karnataka which could not reach due to the transport problem. Moreover, the finished products are also accumulated without sales. Some entrepreneurs have small power loom weaving unit where a handful of workers work for a daily wage. These power loom owners now are not able to give wage for the weavers and many owners scared that they would close their units and search for a job. However, the skill of weaving cannot be used in other fields hence unemployment cannot be sorted out among the weavers in the forthcoming months.

It is feared that some 30,000 skilled weavers in Kanchipuram become jobless. Each weaver normally earns a minimum of Rs 15,000 per month and this gets steadily increased based on the orders. The members of all 22 handloom cooperatives societies are forced to avail loan from the local money-lenders with exorbitant interest rates. The state government earlier initiated many welfare schemes to those weavers as suicide was a common phenomenon among the poor weavers due to their inability to repay the loan they borrowed from money-lenders with huge interest. That pathetic situation may come back due to lockdown, said a poor weaver whose entire family was engaged in weaving and now no income at all.

²³ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/lockdown-leaves-30000-silk-weavers-jobless-in-tamil-nadu/articleshowprint/75366495.cms>

8.3 Domestic Workers

The women work as domestic workers cannot enjoy their summer vacation as it is a forced leave for them. The number of domestic workers cannot be firmly calculated as many domestic workers still are not organized. The lockdown has forsaken their guaranteed income. The interview with the domestic workers revealed that only 10% of the workers are fully paid, whereas 10% got only half month wage. The remaining 80% of the workers are not paid. Most of the domestic servants' are abandoned by their husbands or they live with their drunkard husbands.

The announcement of partial unlock too did not make any change in their life as most of the domestic servants reside in low economic group settlements which are severely affected by COVID-19. Hence their employers are reluctant to engage them due to the pandemic threat. The domestic servants do not know when they will be called by their masters. Many domestic workers are not registered with the welfare board, hence they could not avail the relief aid provided by the government. The non-governmental organizations which involve in relief work during lockdown can help the domestic servants to get registered with the board.

Case Study 10: Dark kitchen of a cook who lit others' kitchen

Sumathi, a domestic servant said "I strictly informed my employers that I will do only cooking. I was working in five houses as a cook, hence I never bothered when my husband eloped with another woman. My main aim in my life to make my only daughter as a professional. I never regretted anything in my life as I want to show my daughter as a brave woman. My cooking skills always put me in high demand. These were all facts only before the lockdown. As the employers are afraid that the virus would spread through touching, they asked me not to come for cooking. Though I work in several kitchens every day, now my kitchen is not functional as none of my employers was ready to pay. I got the essentials distributed by the non-government organizations and my membership in the self-help group sighed a little relief. However, I do not know when I will be called and decided to send me daughter to government school this year. To turn to state board syllabus from CBSE is painful to my daughter but I need to make her understand that this year I cannot get advance from my wage as I normally pay her school fees through the advance amount I get from my employers"

8.4 Commercial Sex Workers

The Government has not recognized commercial sex work as an unorganized employment sector. Though civil societies like National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), SIAAP and Vadamalar Federation continuously work for the rights of sex workers for years, so far no concrete efforts could be made to involve them as one among the disadvantaged group.

Like any other unorganized sector dependent on everyday work and transient income, sex workers too were caught off guard at the sudden implementation of the lockdown. They are like daily wage earners without having any savings to meet out their financial crisis during emergency time. The lockdown forced them to stay at home and stranded them without any income for days together. The only trivial relief is the provision of dry rations from the ration shops. However, the provision is supplied to only those who have ration cards.

As sex workers constantly face prejudice for the job they hold, they are forced to shift houses often to remain safe. That is why they do not have a permanent address and are forced to lose out on the benefits made available by the government. Hence this relief is also away from them. Though Non-government organizations struggle to get this relief work for commercial sex workers, the government was not ready to listen to their meek voices.

Case Study 11: Demeaned for their Work

A commercial sex worker lamented “As the lockdown was so sudden, my sons and I didn’t expect that there would be a loss of income. We were unprepared and hadn’t saved any money. I have been trying to ask for loans from the people in my neighbourhood. One woman I approached demeaned me for my profession. When her daughter continued to speak to me, she pulled her away and instructed her to not talk to me because I am a sex worker”. This is a common tale of almost all commercial sex workers.

In most of the households, the commercial sex workers are the sole breadwinners, they were not able to afford even the essentials without income. Some commercial sex workers have to take care of their dependents like their children, differently-abled family members as most of their husbands are either drunkard or without any income. They thought that they would get the aid of Rs 1000 from the government, but they could not avail the same as the aid is confined to the ration cardholders only..

Case Study 12: Helpless in lockdown extension

A commercial sex worker who is a member of Vadamalar federation expressed that she would be able to make some money after the lockdown was lifted and she would get their normal income. However, she lost her hope when the lockdown extension was announced and is scared of the future. She reiterated that she could manage until now with the ration packet provided by the Vadamalar Federation, but she did not know what to do when that runs out.

The gloomy story of another commercial sex worker is that like many other sex workers, she also has no family or friends to turn to in times of need.

Case Study 13: Unreached by Aid

She sobbed “Recently she had run out of rice and asked her sister who enjoyed ration card relief benefits for help. She was rude to me and said that I didn’t have a family to support as she did; hence she didn’t want to help me. That day I came back home and fainted out of hunger because I didn’t have anything left to eat. When my husband was alive, I was able to rely on him and his source of income. Since his death, it has been very difficult,” this is not a unique story but common to many commercial sex workers.

²⁴ The Hindu 4th June 2020

²⁵ The Hindu, 15th June 2020

8.5 Folk art performers

Hundreds of folk art performers' life became mute at the lockdown. The experts who make others dance to their tunes now stood without any income. Madurai is the major district where more than 5000 Thappattam (a percussion musical instrument performed in the festivals) performers²⁴.

Case Study 14: Unheard Music

Andipandi, a Thappattam performer from Madurai said, normally we earn our income mostly between April and June as there are lots of religious marriages ceremonies would take place. We are engaged in the whole month of May as Madurai Meenakshi celestial marriage festival prolongs for 30 days. We live the whole year off whatever we earn during this festive occasion. The three months pandemic fear makes our and our dependents' survival as a big challenge. We have given a petition to the District Collector requesting to allow us to perform in small functions. We further requested him to make use of our services to perform COVID-19 precautionary awareness camps. We heard that women self-help group members get loans at a low rate of interest, hence we approach non-government organizations to teach us the procedure to form self-help group among ourselves.

The orchestra troops are another sort of musicians who lost their means to livelihood this year and lockdown left them in penury²⁵. There are hundreds of orchestra troops which is the main income source for many talented artists. The incidents of some orchestra artists entering the television media brightened the hope of those artists for assured chances. However, their hopes are shaken due to the lockdown.

A long time before they tried to submit petitions to the government authorities to make use of their services for government propaganda. Now they can be used by the government in its public information activities.

Case Study 15: Triumph and Loss

Rajan, one of the orchestra singer said "Temples, weddings and other festivals in Tamil Nadu are not concluded with our program. We prefer buying new instruments in January as we would have continues programmes from March to May. When we bought new instruments we did not know that these instruments would be rusting for more than two months. If the instruments are not used until June, then they can be used only March of next year. What we afraid happened when the lockdown was announced. The days of the audience getting our autographs are gone and now we are waiting at money lenders' house to get money with exorbitant interest. Since there is neither welfare board nor are we registered with unorganized welfare board, we are not able to avail the aids given by the government. The audience appreciated me the 'the king of voices' but now the same voice is unheard like a king lost his dynasty in a battlefield. The triumph of lockdown defeated our battle for livelihood. We have to make the crowd cheer-up but no there is no crowd allowed hence no ears to hear our music.

9 Recommendations

An officer in each district should be appointed to look after the employment issues and create appropriate data.

²⁵ The Hindu, 15th June 2020

The government should confirm the formalization of employment between the employer and the employee to arrest the exploitation

The Government can provide the poor and their family Rs 6000 for three consecutive months to protect them from starving as recommended by many development economists

It should be ensured that the employers pay the balance payment of the workers and no coercion from the employer side to stop who want to go back to their native place.

Standard operating procedures should be created and properly executed to protect migrant workers. The welfare schemes for the migrant workers can be executed collaborating with civil societies, trade unions, industries.

Free or concessional transport services should be given for the unemployed in post lockdown employment.

The government is spending crores of money for organizing Information, education and communication campaigns. Performers can be utilized for those camps by which the thread on their livelihood would be removed.

The mental health counselling and adequate security arrangements should be arranged to the workers who do not want to go back and prefer to resume their work.

The civil society institutions can be involved in organizing the unorganized workers into the welfare boards and the accident benefits, death benefits, medical benefits should be expanded to all the unorganized workers.

10 Conclusion

'Life is more important than livelihood' seemed meaningful to the poor during the lockdown 1.0. However, the loss of income and uncertainty towards restoration of normalcy made them panic. Government aid was not adequate, timely and in many cases completely denied. Citizens groups and NGOs provided relief service sustain the life of many poor.

Now the poor have become very poor and life is there but no livelihood. The poor should be properly organized and adequately trained by NGOs and workers' unions to prepare for the long and difficult journey for reviving livelihoods.

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