



Fleeing the Scorched Earth: Climate Change, Migration and Livelihood Strategies in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu

A Case Study in
the Context of
Just Transitions

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April 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24943/FSECC04.2026>

This document is produced as part of 'Climate-Induced Migration in the Context of Just Transitions' research project funded by MacArthur Foundation and implemented by The Population Council India and Indian Institute for Human Settlements. The project is designed to explore and address the critical intersections between climate change, migration, and just energy transitions in India.

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Editor: Ishani Debroy

Suggested Citation: Srinivasan, A., & Nagappan, S. B. (2026, May). Fleeing the scorched earth: Climate change, migration and livelihood strategies in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu: A case study in the context of just transitions. <https://doi.org/10.24943/FSECC04.2026>

Design & Layout: Jubeena Judi Joe

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Acknowledgements

The researchers of this study would like to extend their sincere gratitude to Mr. Rajiv Khandelwal, Founder-Aajeevika Bureau, along with Ms. Divya Varma and Dr. Tara Nair, Co-Founders of Work Fair and Free. All of them have been a source of constant support and have guided us since the beginning of our primary study that was aimed at understanding out-migration from the district of Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu. We would also like to express our thanks to Dr. Geeta Thatra who worked on the proposal and played a pivotal role during the course of the study.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the project team at Indian Institute of Human Settlements, led by Dr Chandni Singh and Dr Amir Bazaz, and the Population Council of India for accepting our proposal and providing us the financial support for carrying out this project. We would also like to thank Ms. Yashodara Udupa and Mr. S J Hemant Kumar from the Media Lab at IIHS for providing us with crucial assistance in audio-visual documentation of this study.

We are, of course, hugely indebted to Ms. Sarala Senthilkumar and her team from VIP-NGO, Dharmapuri who have been associated with us since the first day of this study. Ms. Sarala's understanding of the local community dynamics, local practices, geography and terrain of the region helped us immensely in contextualising and building up a framework for our study. Her connections, networking and presence on the ground assisted us in carrying the study forward with authenticity. The grassroots work that Ms. Sarala and her team undertake in Dharmapuri has also provided us with valuable insights on the intersections of migration, climate-change, and agricultural vulnerabilities.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all the field surveyors who helped us collect data at village levels on migration, worker incomes, agricultural issues, climate change, and other indicators that have proven to be important for this study. We take this moment to acknowledge the hard work and efforts that they put in collecting data across different geographical locations, braving heat and rain in the region.

This study would not have materialised without the constant support of all our other contacts in Dharmapuri who took out time to assist in our scoping, data collection, and interviews. We are also thankful to the migrant workers coming



from different communities who spoke to us openly and helped us to understand the grave issues that they continue to face as people who have been pushed to the margins and are the ones who are most affected by the loss of livelihood that accompanies great shifts in climatic manifestations.

List of Acronyms

DMDK	Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
IIHS	Indian Institute for Human Settlements
MBC	Most Backward Classes
MNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MSL	Mean Sea Level
NTK	Naam Tamilar Katchi
NSSO	National Sample Survey Organisation
PCI	Population Council of India
PMK	Pattali Makkal Katchi
PMAY	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana
RDO	Rural Development Office
SC	Scheduled Castes
SLHEP	Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project
TMPK	Takam Mising Porin Kebang
SEEDS	Social Economic Environmental Development Society (NGO)
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TAPWT	Thainadu Animal Live-Stock Protection Welfare and Development Trust (NGO)
TNSAPCC	Tamil Nadu State Action Plan for Climate Change
VCK	Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi
VIP	Village Improvement Program (NGO)
WFF	Work Fair and Free



Figure 1: Signboard on the highway connecting Dharmapuri to Bengaluru
Source: IIHS Media Lab

Executive Summary





Executive Summary

This study is essentially aimed at exploring micro-level views that bring together a nuanced understanding on the complex intersections of climate and labour migration. In 2024, the Population Council of India and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements began exploring the finer contours of climate-induced migration, such as rural and urban livelihoods and transitions, urban growth and the capacity of urban areas to incorporate migrants in equitable and sustainable ways, and connections and feedback loops involving consumption, energy, just transition, and climate-resilient development. This exploration led to the understanding that little is known about these factors and therefore, a detailed, ‘bottom-up study’ that addresses them became vital.

One of the important criteria of the research was that the study area should be situated in a climate hotspot region. Dharmapuri, a north-western district in Tamil Nadu, has in the recent past seen immense erratic climate manifestations. A district primarily dependent on agriculture, it has gone from dry and arid agricultural fields with rapidly depleting groundwater and rain failures to sudden unseasonal heavy rainfall, flooding, and inundation—all in a span of one year. The Tamil Nadu State Action Plan for Climate Change (TNAPCC) 2019 posits Dharmapuri as one of the highly vulnerable districts under its Composite Vulnerability Index (CVI). In the same document, Dharmapuri district is stated to have shown high water vulnerability, while the state itself is predicted to see rising temperatures and erratic precipitation in the coming years.

Dharmapuri district is characterised by small land-holdings across its geography and almost all of the agriculture is dependent on rainfall, which in recent times has either vanished in some parts of the district or become erratic, making it difficult for farmers to predict the course of their agricultural events. This has, in the recent past, exacerbated people’s migration in search of alternative work and livelihoods from the district, which has had a long history of labour migration.

In the wake of decreasing livelihood options within Dharmapuri district, the region sees significant semi-permanent and cyclical migration to the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Kerala, while a few choose to move within the district and other



districts within the state of Tamil Nadu as well. According to the 2015 Tamil Nadu Migration Survey conducted by Irudaya Rajan, the out-migrating population of Dharmapuri is 35,635. It falls in the second category under Rajan's categorisation, of having 50-100 migrants per 1000 households. While district-level statistics are difficult to come by, Rajan's study informs us that 43 per cent of the out-migrating population from Tamil Nadu moves to Karnataka, followed by Kerala at 17.8 per cent (Rajan et al., 2020). Work Fair and Free has been anchoring a study in the region to understand migration statistics and dynamics for the past two years now, and the opportunity provided by both IIHS and PCI to join in as a case-study partner allowed us to explore deeply the aspects of climate-induced migration in the district of Dharmapuri.

This research attempts to foster knowledge on the drivers of labour migration, understand its dynamics, and to elucidate the challenges and vulnerabilities that migrating communities are exposed to in a world where climate change is increasingly exacerbating existing inequities and undermining the resilience of people, places, and systems across the region. This study brings together narratives from three major blocks in Dharmapuri district through both quantitative and qualitative data that tell us how short-term but erratic climatic events are becoming a major push factor in out-migration from Dharmapuri district. The aim of the study is to also situate such movements within the larger paradigm of class, caste and gender, since these factors affect the decisions, movement durations, and networks of migration. We see how these same factors also influence adaptive capacities of communities at both the source and the destination locations.

While making these connections between migration, climate change, class, and caste, this research delves deeper into the vulnerabilities that communities are exposed to during the course of their movement. While labour migration serves as a primary source of livelihood for people in Dharmapuri district, this study also looks into what issues and challenges this movement raises for people, and how communities come together and build resilience strategies in the source location.

01

Introduction



1 Introduction

Dharmapuri is one of the 38 districts in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Dharmapuri is situated in the northwest along the western rim of the Western Ghats (Jeganathan et al., 2021) and forms a part of what is known as the 'upland plateau region' in Tamil Nadu (Mayakannan & Vadivel, 2020). Dharmapuri, including Krishnagiri, was a part of the larger Salem district during the early years of independent India, and in 1965, it was made a separate district for administrative ease and development (Director of Census Operations, Tamil Nadu, 2001). Subsequently, in 2004, Dharmapuri district was bifurcated again, creating Krishnagiri as a separate district. Presently, Dharmapuri district is spread across a total geographical area of 4,498 sq. km. and includes 8 talukas, 10 blocks, and 251 village panchayats.

1.1 Historical Overview of the District

Dharmapuri is a region that is enclosed (some call it sandwiched) between the more affluent districts of Krishnagiri to the north, Salem to the south and Tiruvannamalai on the east. It is historically significant as a region where "intermediary castes" like Kongu Vellala Kounders and Vanniyars, established dominance by displacing the original Vettuva tribal inhabitants (Gunasekaran, 2016; Harriss, 2015). Identified as the Kongu region by dominant caste Vanniyar and Kongu Vellalars, this mythical region comprises of Erode, Coimbatore, Tirupur, Namakkal, and certain parts of Dindigul, Salem, Dharmapuri, and Karur.



the state and the simultaneous transition of Dalit labour from farming to the services and manufacturing sectors. These political developments have significantly influenced the complex socio-economic structure that emphasises caste pride and honour through control over land.

Historically, Tamil Nadu has recorded high incidents of violence and atrocities against Dalits, dating back to 1976 (Devakumar, 2007), with a notable surge since the 1990s, including incidents in Dharmapuri. The animosity between caste groups, especially Vanniyars (Most Backward Classes [MBC]) and Adi Dravidars (SC), has been escalating since the 1990s, erupting in the 2012 attacks on Dalit settlements in Dharmapuri, allegedly in retaliation for an inter-caste marriage between a Vanniyar woman and a Dalit man. Hundreds of Dalit houses were burnt down and looted, leaving around 1,500 Dalits homeless (*Mob Burns Hundreds of Dalit Homes*, 2012). Such incidents underscore the prevailing structural inequalities in Dharmapuri. Vanniyar and Kongu Vellala Gounder communities continue to exert control over industries and institutions of private and vocational education, limiting opportunities for upward social mobility among the lower castes.



Figure 3: A burnt Dalit house during the Vachathi incident in Dharmapuri

Source: kractivist.wordpress.com

In the past, Dharmapuri has also been involved in the Naxalite movement in India, with many people who joined the movement coming from the district. This caused immense state and police repression on marginalised communities and Dalits, and the district has a history of such violent cases. One such incident was a shootout by Andhra Pradesh Police in Seshachalam forests in 2015, which killed 20 Tamil men from Tiruvannamalai, Salem, and Dharmapuri districts (*Death in the Woods: 10 Years of Sorrow and Silence for Kin of Seshachalam Encounter Victims*, n.d.). A special task force, known as the Andhra Pradesh Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force, had allegedly abducted these men who had migrated to Andhra to work and shot them in alleged self-defense. The task force had later alleged that the workers were part of a group that was engaged in red sandalwood smuggling, and had attacked forest personnel with axes and stones (*Death in the Woods: 10 Years of Sorrow and Silence for Kin of Seshachalam Encounter Victims*, n.d.). More than 10 years later, no one from the task force or from the Andhra Pradesh Police has been held accountable for their actions, while victims' families keep struggling to fight for justice in a case that has



gone dormant (*Death in the Woods: 10 Years of Sorrow and Silence for Kin of Seshachalam Encounter Victims*, n.d.).

1.2 Geographic Overview

Dharmapuri's landscape, characterised by undulating terrain with slopes ranging from 380 to 1395 meters above Mean Sea Level (MSL) (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2011), poses significant challenges for agriculture. Despite agriculture being a primary source of livelihood for approximately 40 percent of the population, Dharmapuri's topography is not conducive to high-yielding agriculture typical of more fertile regions of India (Jeganathan et al., 2021). Before the bifurcation of Dharmapuri in 2004, forests covered nearly 33 per cent of the district's total area, allowing 41.4 per cent of the total irrigated land for agriculture. Post-bifurcation from Krishnagiri, the gross irrigated area decreased to 30.1 per cent (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2011). These geographic and environmental factors contribute to the district's agricultural limitations, exacerbating the difficulties faced by farmers in sustaining their livelihoods.



Figure 4: A farmer works in her field at the foot of a hill, Dharmapuri
Source: Media Lab IIHS

The climate of Tamil Nadu is semi-arid with tropical monsoons (Jeganathan et al., 2021). The state typically receives maximum rainfall during the post-monsoon season between October and December (distinct from the general climate of the Indian subcontinent) and experiences cyclones and monsoon floods. Tamil Nadu has seven agro-climatic zones: north-eastern, north-western, Cauvery delta, western, high-altitude, southern, and high rainfall zones. It is frequently subjected to extreme weather conditions, such as flooding in coastal districts, severe chronic droughts in certain areas, and periodic droughts in others due to inter-seasonal and intra-seasonal variations (Bal et al., 2015). Some districts also witness heat waves that occur between March and June. Studies show that climate-induced sea level rise is a significant global challenge in low-lying coastal regions. With its long coastline, the coastal districts in Tamil Nadu are also encountering such issues (Jeganathan et al., 2021).

Conversely, districts like Dharmapuri, situated in the north-western upland plateau region, experience extreme drought exacerbated by low rainfall and erratic



monsoons. Dharmapuri, along with Salem and Coimbatore, is frequently affected by droughts and extreme heat waves, as highlighted by researchers at Anna University's Centre for Climate Change and Disaster Management (Jeganathan et al., 2021). Notably, Dharmapuri has been marked by turbulent climatic conditions since the late 1980s, when severe droughts hit Tamil Nadu, resulting in Dharmapuri and its neighbouring districts being declared as drought-prone areas in the subsequent decade (Sundari, 2005).

Dharmapuri district's vulnerability to drought is underscored by its average annual rainfall of 857 mm, dropping significantly to 156.9 mm during the summer months, which also coincides with the sowing season between March and May, as per the 2001 census (Nitheshnirmal & S. Arivazhagan, 2019). According to a study conducted in 2015, the district received 238.33 mm rainfall during the southwest monsoon season between June and September (Rajendran & Venkatasubramani, 2017). Additionally, studies indicate a gradual increase in 'land surface temperatures' in Dharmapuri between 2006 and 2018, peaking drastically in 2016, 2017, and 2018 and coinciding with severe drought (Nitheshnirmal & S. Arivazhagan, 2019). In 2017, Dharmapuri was at the centre of Tamil Nadu's worst drought in 140 years, which, in turn, adversely affected the agriculture and water sectors (Hemalatha, 2018).



Figure 5: A burnt Dalit house during the Vachathi incident in Dharmapuri
Source: Media Lab IIHS

Research also highlights the adverse impact of decreasing precipitation levels due to the impact of climate change on dry land agriculture. A dry spell during the critical growth period can cause 'significant damage and harm the local economy' (Angles et al., 2011). For instance, a decade-long analysis from 1999 to 2008 reveals very high yield losses of 40-50 per cent during moderate drought years for dry land crops like sorghum, ragi, and horse gram (Angles et al., 2011). Farmers in Dharmapuri 'perceive' these changes as indicative of climate change, with approximately 83 per cent expressing that there was a 'change in climatic and rainfall patterns' and 54 per cent attributing the reduction in yield to the 'change in seasonal patterns'. Nearly 100 per cent of small-scale and about 92 per cent of the surveyed farmers reported that the decline in rainfall was the primary cause for the decrease in crop yields (Angles et al., 2011). Moreover, Dharmapuri exhibits a high Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI), indicating low annual agricultural growth and high multidimensional poverty (Jeganathan et al., 2021). These studies collectively suggest that changing climatic conditions, particularly decreasing and erratic rainfall have intensified drought and disrupted dry land agriculture in Dharmapuri.



At the state level, the draft document of the Tamil Nadu State Action Plan for Climate Change (TNSAPCC) posits that climate change has started to affect agriculture, with studies in Tamil Nadu showing that all districts in an agroclimatic zone do not fall under the same category of vulnerability. This exemplifies the need for the state government to prioritise research in development issues and effective decision-making through ‘Location- Performance- Vulnerability’ based adaptation strategies (State Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019).

1.3 Out-migration History and Dynamics

Recurrent drought, low food security levels, and limited industrial growth prompted the Union Government to declare Dharmapuri as a ‘backward district’ in 2001 (Director of Census Operations, Tamil Nadu, 2001). The state of Tamil Nadu had been hit by recurrent severe droughts in 1989, 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2002, leading to distress. Dharmapuri, which was one of the worst affected districts, was declared drought prone by the Government of Tamil Nadu in the 1990s. It is in this context that we must look at the historical aspect of migration from the district. With neighbouring districts of Salem, Villupuram, Dindigul, and Ramanathapuram also being declared drought prone, workers from Dharmapuri—a region with low manufacturing output and very high numbers of casual workers—were forced to move out to larger cities, with a large stream settling up in Coimbatore—almost 63 per cent in the decade mentioned (Sundari, 2005). Recent studies, such as those conducted by Govindharaju, establish Coimbatore as a major destination location for migrant workers coming from Dharmapuri. In his study, 53 per cent of migrant workers out of a sample of 480 workers were from Dharmapuri (Govindharaju, 2021).

On the other hand, quantitative district level analysis carried out by Irudaya Rajan et al. place Dharmapuri as one of the top 10 out-migrating districts in Tamil Nadu, which has a high index of incoming migrants (Rajan et al., 2020). In his 2015 study, Irudaya Rajan states that the total out-migrating population from Dharmapuri comes to about 35, 635 (Rajan et al., 2020). However, this does not include a bifurcation between internal migration and interstate migration.

Although such studies provide a broader overview of migration from the district, specific dynamics of migration remain missing. This study is aimed at unearthing some of these aspects through a structured format.



02

Research Questions





2 Research Questions

Work Fair and Free has been working on a larger study that aims to explore migration pathways from Dharmapuri to various work destinations in southern India and the most significant drivers for the same. The case study, dovetailed onto our larger research enquiry, aims to delve deeper into the socio-economic and environmental factors driving out-migration from the drought-prone Dharmapuri district to urban centres like Coimbatore, Bengaluru and Ernakulam/Cochin with a specific focus on the role of climate change in shaping migration dynamics.

The key research questions of this study are:

1. How do socioeconomic characteristics, such as disparities in land ownership impact livelihoods and mediate the experience of migration from Dharmapuri? How does climate change intersect with these drivers?
2. What are the intra-district variations in migration? Which social groups are more vulnerable to climate stressors, and how does this vulnerability influence migration decisions or patterns?
3. How is climate change perceived and experienced by different groups of migrant workers in the source locations? What coping strategies are adopted by diverse migrant communities to mitigate the effects of climate change on their livelihoods in source areas?
4. What are the different mitigation strategies employed by migrant workers in Dharmapuri? Are the agricultural and livelihood transitions just in nature?

03

Methodology



Table 1: Methods employed in the study

Method	Description and Aims of the Method	Sample Studied
Quantitative Survey	To quantify migration dynamics like duration, nature, destination location, return migration, etc., and to understand reasons for migration, climatic issues, and vulnerabilities faced in destination location.	150 households across 3 selected blocks in Dharmapuri, namely Dharmapuri, Harur, and Palacode.
Structured Long-Form Interviews	Interviews with selected labourers from different sectors (agriculture, construction, petty-business owners, platform-based and other contractual workers) and from different caste and location backgrounds were conducted to qualitatively define migration dynamics, understand climate timelines and diagnose climate vulnerabilities from the ground.	20–30 people across all talukas in Dharmapuri
Focus Group Discussions	Discussions with different occupational, gender, and NGO groups were facilitated to garner nuanced understanding of the migration and climate shifts as well as understand livelihood shifts.	Around 3–5 groups across all talukas surveyed.



3 Methodology

For this study, the research team adopted a mixed methods approach to explore out-migration from Dharmapuri, combining ethnographic methods, surveys, in-depth interviews, field observations and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). These were structured to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of migration, climate change, and livelihood challenges of migrant workers.

A survey questionnaire was developed after scoping and dipstick test in all the talukas of Dharmapuri. The questionnaire included six sections, namely: general household profile; amenities; worker profile; migration status; migration vulnerabilities; and income, expenditure and finances. These sections were envisioned to provide quantitative information on the migration dynamics of workers and their conditions of informal work at the destination location to understand migration flows and issues surrounding debt either arising out of migration or otherwise. Codified responses were developed based on our scoping exercise in the district.

Three talukas (refer to Table 1 above) of the eight were chosen to conduct the survey. This selection was based on the diversity of the talukas in terms of geographic, climatic, spatial, and migration conditions. All three talukas had seemingly different narratives of migration and climate variabilities that the survey was aimed at extracting. Purposive sampling was used to enlist households through active engagement with potential respondents and public-facing NGOs. Lists of villages in each taluka were readied to understand the caste demography, and villages were selected to ensure less repetitiveness and more diversity in terms of caste and sector representation.

Ethnographic methods have the potential to bring out detailed life histories, documenting individual and household-level motivations and aspirations that inform specific migration choices and lived experiences of transitions in agriculture and livelihoods. Interviews with migrant and non-migrant households in Dharmapuri provided a platform for in-depth discussions on specific themes, such as livelihood challenges, perspectives on climate change and its potential implications for

livelihoods and migration patterns, and the coping strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change. Interviews and FGDs with different communities and individuals have been especially important as a strategy to understand how people collectively understand climate change, while talking about it in terms of extremes in the weather observed in the past few decades, losses in yield leading to depressed household incomes by share of agriculture, increasing human–animal conflict, and forceful migration as responses or mitigation strategies.

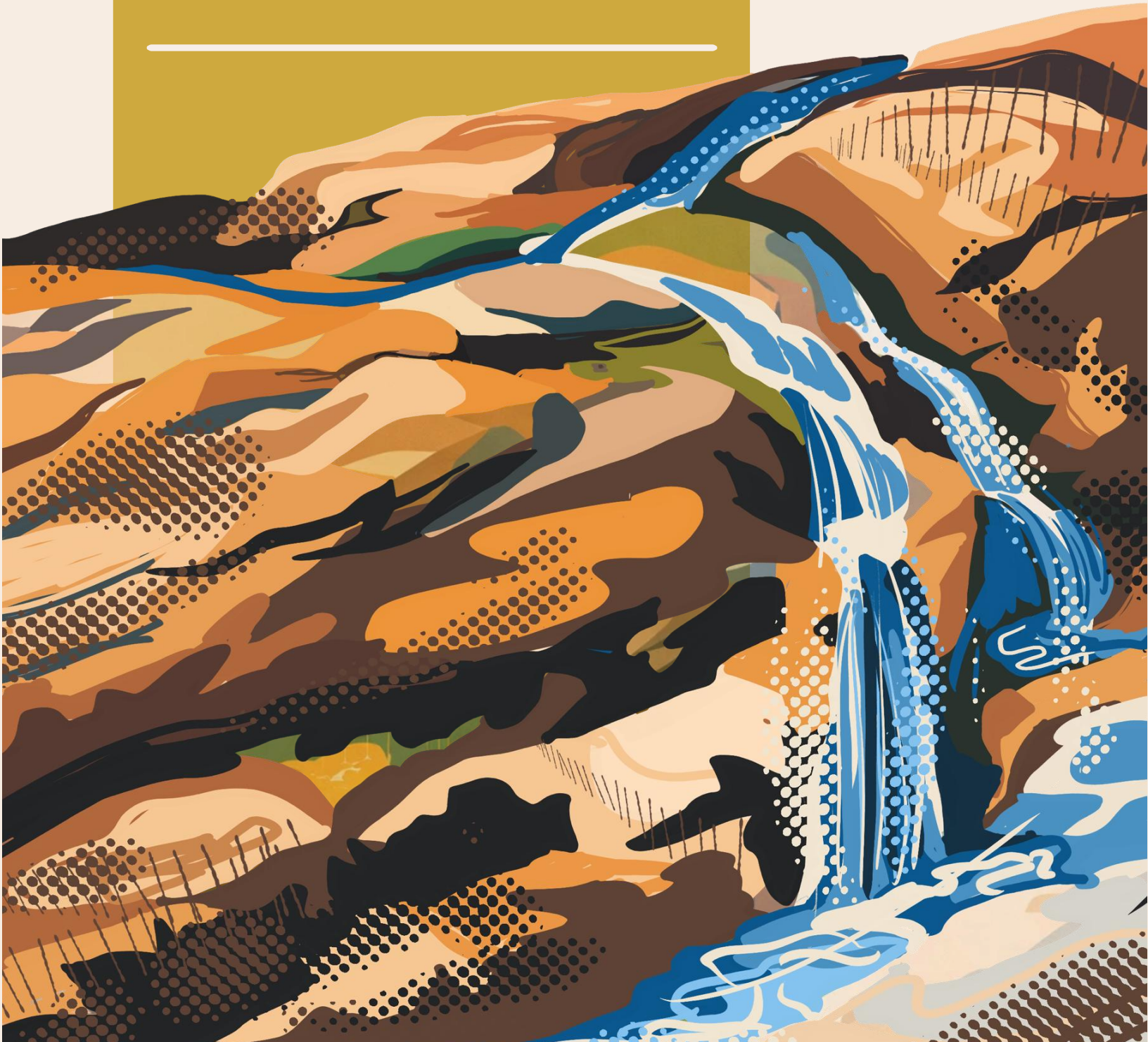
This research report heavily relies on the data collected from the three talukas of Dharmapuri to analyse the migration dynamics emerging from the district. A methodological layering of secondary data, if and when made available for certain data points discussed here, will enrich the findings of the study. Although efforts were taken to ensure inclusion of diverse households for the survey, some repetition has emerged as a limitation in the dataset.

Data collected through surveys were analysed through Excel and detailed tabulations are presented in the report. Interviews and FGD responses were recorded with the consent of the participant (both by writing and at times by recording the audio) and transcribed and coded for themes of interest.



04

Situating our Research





4 Situating our Research

Dharmapuri district presents a unique story of migration in the context of Tamil Nadu— the district has high numbers of out-migration while the state is characterised by high numbers of in-migration. This contrasting story creates ripples in the state narrative as well, which views migration as a positive change in the lives of labouring communities.

Further, the long history of migration from the district to nearby states such as Karnataka and Kerala and to bigger industrial hubs within Tamil Nadu, such as Tiruppur, Salem, Erode, Coimbatore and Chennai, derives from the fact that produce from dry land agriculture in Dharmapuri has always been consumed at the household and family level, and only in rare cases—where the landholdings were bigger and produced more yield—was it sold outside. In the course of our scoping in the district to try and understand migration dynamics, we visited multiple villages in all the talukas and spoke to different communities of labour migrants. What came up as a common phenomenon across these different geographies and communities within the region was the small size of landholding across communities—not exceeding 2–3 acres in most cases—and the reality of migration till recent times as a means to diversify income sources. Until very recently, small landholdings ensured food security to households, while migration provided them with access to other resources, such as healthcare, private education, employment opportunities, etc.

On the other hand, factors like landholding, caste background, geographic location (and associated climate vulnerabilities) play a determining role in migration-based decisions that communities make. Table 2 below provides the caste breakup of surveyed households while also depicting their nature and type of landholding and irrigation methods.

Table 2: Land and irrigation across three surveyed talukas in Dharmapuri

Dharmapuri Block = 50 HH Total										
Caste Group	No. of Households	Landholding Status (HH)	Type of Land (HH)		Irrigated Land (HH)	Unirrigated Land (HH)	Source of Irrigation (HH)			
			Agricultural	Home stead			Water Bodies	Well	Bore-Well	Drip-Irrigation
MBC	36	16	9	7	6	2	2	4	-	-
SC	9	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
ST	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BC										
BC-Muslims	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
General	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-



Not Known	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	50									
Harur Block = 50 HH Total										
Caste Group	No. of Households	Landholding Status (HH)	Type of Land (HH)		Irrigated Land (HH)	Unirrigated Land (HH)	Source of Irrigation (HH)			
			Agricultural	Home stead			Water Bodies	Well	Bore-Well	Drip-Irrigation
MBC	8	2	2	-	2	-	-	1	1	-
SC	39	19	13	6	8	5	-	6	-	-
ST	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-



BC-Muslims	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
General	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Not Known	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	50									

Palacode Block = 50 HH Total

Caste Group	No. of Households	Landholding Status (HH)	Type of Land (HH)		Irrigated Land (HH)	Unirrigated Land (HH)	Source of Irrigation (HH)			
			Agricultural	Home stead			Water Bodies	Well	Bore-Well	Drip-Irrigation
MBC	42	14	7	7	4	3	-	4	-	-
SC	3	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-



ST	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BC	3	2	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	-
BC- Muslims	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
General	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Not Known	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-
TOTAL	50									



Our findings show that in Dharmapuri taluka, 6 per cent of households reported losses in agricultural yield due to rain failures. In Palacode and Harur, 4 per cent of households also reported the same, in addition to 4 per cent of households reporting losses due to animal issues in Harur. On the other hand, 6 per cent of households in Harur and 8 per cent of households in Palacode reported low water-level/droughts leading to crop failures, while 14 per cent of households in Harur faced rising cost of production which led to issues in agricultural yield and production. Although some of these issues could be traced back to the shifts in climate occurring over the past few decades in Dharmapuri district, most of these could be directly linked to the exacerbation of migration from the district.

4.1 Unpacking the Central Issue

In recent times however, the sudden shifts in climate have marginalised dry land agriculturalists in Dharmapuri to a great extent. Abrupt and unforeseen shifts in the climate have made it increasingly difficult for farmers in Dharmapuri to predict the natural course of rain or the seasons that become important to plan agricultural events. It was through prolonged conversations with affected communities in all talukas of Dharmapuri district that we were able to understand the nuances of the issue.

In 2024, the district underwent extreme climatic events that caused immense trouble for the agricultural communities. In April 2024, farmers and the farmers' association in the region urged the state government to declare the district as 'drought-hit' ("Declare Dharmapuri as Drought-Hit, Urge Farmers," 2024) as most water bodies and even wells had dried up due to extreme land temperatures. Farmers had also pointed out that the consecutive failures of both south-west and north-east monsoons in the previous years had exacerbated these issues in the region ("Declare Dharmapuri as Drought-Hit, Urge Farmers", 2024).

In December of the same year, cyclone Fengal hit Tamil Nadu, which led to record rainfall in Dharmapuri, touching up to 331mm in Harur (TNM, 2024). Not only did this cause damage to roads and bridges, but the incessant and sudden downpour led to 2,194 hectares of farmland being inundated in Dharmapuri (Henry, 2024).



Figure 6: Crops destroyed by sudden rains in Dharmapuri
Source: Media Lab IIHS

These sudden changes in the climate leading to extreme and erratic events, combined with the agricultural issues faced by households as described earlier, have pushed farmers in the region to a complete state of destitution, with some farmers being pushed into extreme indebtedness. Thus, in recent years, Migration has become more of a necessity for survival for people in Dharmapuri district than a means of diversifying their income to gain access to resources. Migrating for work and a means to earn money for survival becomes directly linked to these changes in climatic conditions in the region.

On the other hand, however, it is also pertinent to mention here that the vast region of Dharmapuri does not, in essence, produce a homogenous narrative of either climate change or migration. The different geographies and their topographies within the district produce heterogeneous narratives that are cross-cutting. An interesting example is of the villages in Palacode and Harur talukas. Palacode is a hilly terrain situated towards the north of the main town of Dharmapuri. The topography of this taluka makes agriculture naturally difficult, and thus, villagers move out in search of work. Due to issues of water run-off and the unavailability of catchment zones or structures, agriculture faces further issues in Palacode in the absence or failure of



rains. In Harur, on the other hand, the issue is not the availability of water but that of increasing land temperatures causing difficulties in agriculture.

However, another issue that is closely connected to the effect of prolonged drying up of the region, as has been mentioned previously, is the problem of wild animals like boars, peacocks, monkeys, elephants, deer, rabbits, rats, and wild buffaloes destroying crops right at the time of harvest or soon after sowing. This is an issue that uniformly affects almost all parts of the region, which has 33 per cent of it covered in forest area (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2011). These issues have only become exacerbated in recent times due to rain failures in the district in 2024. Local farming communities attribute these issues to forests drying up and animals coming down to fields in search of cooler shades, water and food. Further, various pest insect attacks also augment the farming crisis.

These factors, which affect communities differently based on their geographical location and the climatic vulnerabilities resulting from it, play a direct role in the decisions made by labouring communities in their migration trajectories. A small example of this is shown in Figure 7 below, which displays a flowchart of migration streams and locations in a particular village in Palacode taluka among different communities. One of the major aims of this research was to try and explain the movement of labour within this paradigm of shifting climate in the source region.

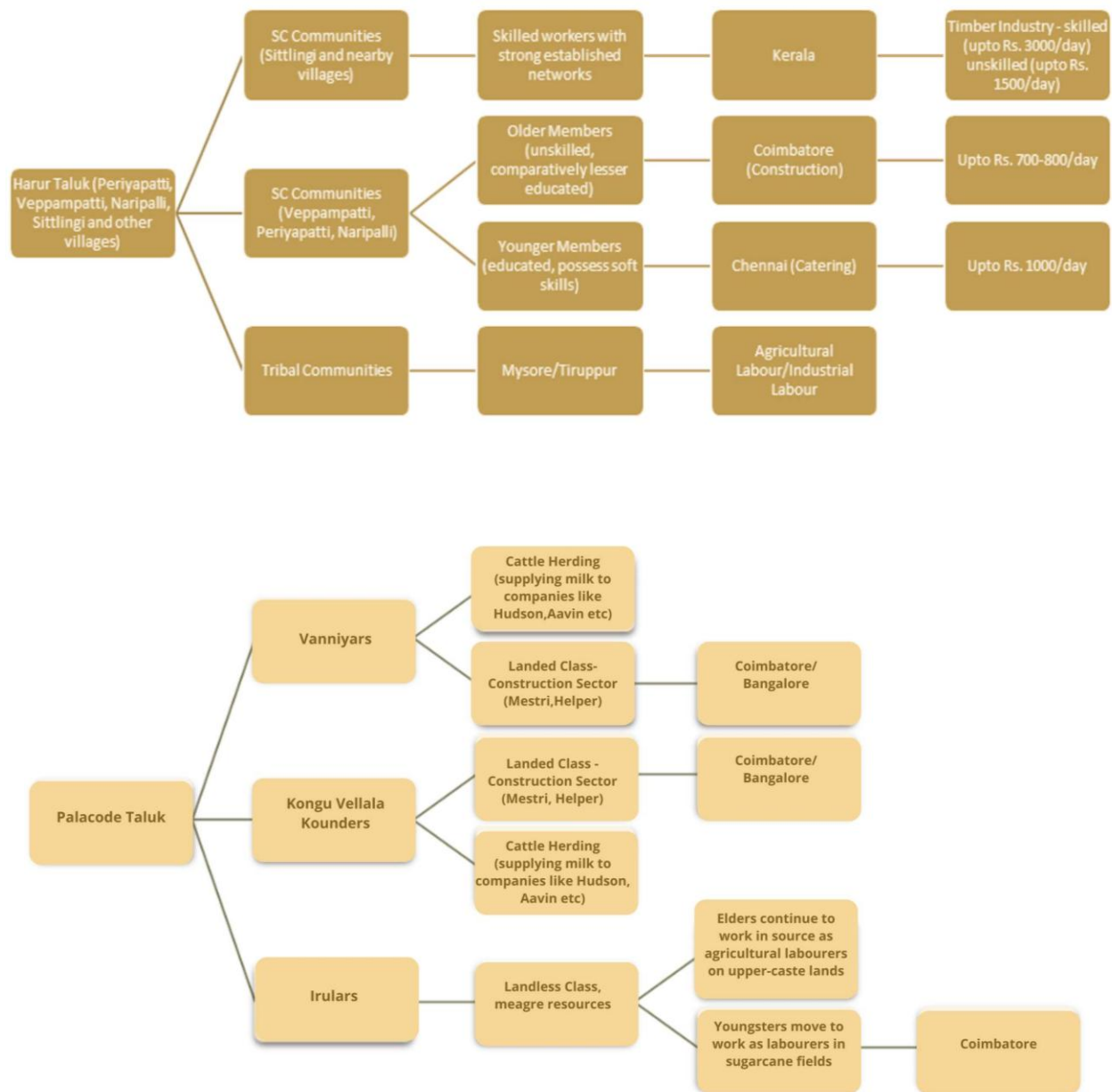


Figure 7: Flowchart of migration streams and locations among MBC, SC and ST communities from two major talukas of Dharmapuri.

Our survey findings presented in Table 3 also provide a deeper understanding of the migration flow across different caste groups, destination locations, and occupation sectors.

Table 3: Primary destination locations and occupation sectors across the surveyed households

Total Households across Caste Groups Surveyed		Primary Destination Location across Households		Primary Occupation Sector Across Households	
Caste Group	Total No. of Households	Destination Location	Total No. of Households	Occupation Sector	Total No. of Households
MBC	86	Bengaluru	24	Construction	40
SC	51	Coimbatore	16	Construction	25
ST	4	Dharmapuri (intra-district)	2	Construction	3
Others	9	-	-	-	-

From the 57 per cent of MBC households surveyed, around 27 per cent households migrate to Bengaluru, with at least 46 per cent members from these households being employed in the construction sector. We can see from the table that construction becomes the primary sector of employment for migrant labour coming from all major caste groups in Dharmapuri, although our survey data also points out that around 12 per cent are employed in wholesale/retail trade (mostly petty shop-owners or scrap dealers, as clarified from qualitative data), and another 8 per cent are employed in manufacturing industries. From the total sample surveyed, 47.3 per cent of households reported that the primary earning member in their household was employed as a migrant construction worker.¹

As posited by authors like Ravi Srivastava and Priya Deshingkar in their seminal studies, the caste and landholding status of communities, along with their human capital, play an important role in deciding which communities move where and for how long. This study tries to bring out these nuances within labour migration from

¹ Other figures mentioned above (12% for wholesale/retail trade and 8% for manufacturing industries) are for primary earning member of the household.

Dharmapuri in the wake of both climate-induced and climate-augmented migration from the district.



05

Transitions in the Dharmapuri District



5 Transitions in the Dharmapuri District

5.1 Rural Transitions

The relative industrial development and availability of work in adjacent districts is a stark contrast to Dharmapuri, where industrial growth has been minimal, leading to out-migration from the district. This, as has been mentioned, is exacerbated by agricultural difficulties caused by extreme climatic events in the district.

A quantitative survey of migrating households undertaken across multiple villages in 3 talukas—Dharmapuri, Harur, and Palacode—shows that in at least 20 per cent of the households, members migrate due to unavailability of work locally. Table 4 shows that apart from pull factors like availability of better wages in the destination region (46.66 per cent), people across caste groups are also pushed to move to different locations mainly due factors such as unavailability of work locally (20 per cent), agricultural failures in the source region (7.30 per cent), and failure of government schemes like NREGA (3.33 per cent).

Table 4: Push and pull factors of migration across households surveyed in Dharmapuri district

Why do members in the household migrate?		
Reason (as coded in the survey)	% of households	No. of Households
Availability of better wages (at the destination location)	46.66	70
Unavailability of work locally	20	30
Better working conditions in the destination	10	15
Agricultural/crop failures	7.30	11
Failure of government employment schemes like NREGA	3.33	5
Indebtedness	0.66	1
Any other reason	12	18



Talking to a SC migrant worker in Periyapatti village in Harur taluka helped us deeply understand the implications of such push factors of migration. Shankar², who migrates to Coimbatore every 15–20 days to work in private construction sites told us that caste-based discrimination is also seen in government-aided employment opportunities, especially in initiatives like MNREGA where divisions of days of labour are done on the basis of the community that the worker belongs to. “Even locally owned poultries and other small-scale enterprises deny us work based on our identity as Dalits”, Shankar said.

Ganesh,³ another worker from Harur taluka, stated that the district is not completely bereft of industrial occupation; however, these opportunities become severely restricted when they are offered to Hindi-speaking migrant workers coming from North Indian states, who usually work for lesser wages. The district has a few granite processing enterprises, the biggest of which is Amman Granites. Owned and operated by dominant caste family members who have immense political and financial capital, Amman Granites has started employing Hindi-speaking migrant labourers as opposed to local workers due to the stark difference in wage rates. “Local workers demand around ₹800–900 a day for a full day’s work, whereas the Hindi-speaking workers are employed at half of this cost. Moreover, the contractors make sure that they stay within the factory premises, which ensures that they work for more than the stipulated working hours. Since workers also come from afar, they agree to this arrangement and live on the factory site. We are not preferred for work since we live with families and demand for money”, said Ganesh.

Shankar and Ganesh’s testimonies shed light on the issue of workers being pushed out of Dharmapuri to look for employment opportunities elsewhere. The local industrial labour market in Dharmapuri has seen shifts recently where a majority of the workers come from North Indian states. Talking to one worker from Bihar working in a coir processing unit in Dharmapuri, we learned that the wage rates for such workers was as low as ₹400–500 a day, where the worker stayed either near the factory or directly on the factory premises and was expected to work anywhere

² Name changed

³ Name changed

between 10–14 hours a day. With local workers, these issues became points of contention with the management, who had now replaced local women workers with North Indian workers due to the difference in their wage rates.



Figure 8: Migrant workers working in a coir factory in Palacode Taluka
Source: WWF Research Team



As in the case of Shankar, most of the migration from Dharmapuri from different caste groups is to the construction sector, as seen in Table 3.

As mentioned, these transitions of labouring communities are extremely systematised and closely networked and the combination of a particular pathway of migration and migrant labour is highly dependent on the latter's landholding, social, financial, and human capital.⁴ Ravi Srivastava (2020) points to this in his work that is aimed at understanding circular migration in India. Srivastava states that rural out-migration in India is closely dependent on factors of differentiation in the origin area in both class and social terms (Srivastava, 2020). These factors of differentiation are closely associated with distribution of land, physical assets, and human capital, which play an important role in determining the outcomes of migration (Srivastava, 2020). The narratives of two young migrant workers from Palacode coming from different socio-economic backgrounds correlated with this relationship as posited by Srivastava:

A young Vanniyar migrant worker from Palacode told us that he works in private construction sites in Coimbatore. Enrolled in a civil engineering course earlier, he left his studies mid-way to work for a private company Coimbatore for a salary of ₹10,000/month. However, a few months after working here, he quit his job and started working as a construction worker through his uncle's networks in Coimbatore, since the higher wage rates in construction in Coimbatore ensured him a monthly salary between ₹15,000–20,000. A few years down the line, he hopes to become a *mestri* which will ensure him an even higher wage rate.

On the other hand, at the Irular settlement some distance away in the same taluka, was a young man from the ST community who, much like the Vanniyar migrant worker, had dropped out of school to be able to work and earn to support his family. But unlike the Vanniyar worker, he did not have access to a readily established pathway of migration that ensured him a sense of security and freedom. Although he too moved to Coimbatore to work as an agricultural labour, there was a distinct lack of a sense of negotiating power that he held at both the destination and source locations, which was present in the Vanniyar worker's narrative. This is primarily due to their caste backgrounds and the access that each of them has as a result of them.

4



The Vanniya worker's caste is not only an identity, but manifests as a form of capital that provides him with distinct pathways of migration leading to a dependable, secure network in the destination region that provides further opportunities to either move up the economic ladder within the same migration cycle or enter into newer, entrepreneurial opportunities.

In her recent work, Priya Deshingkar (2017) goes against her earlier postulations of migration being an important factor in the upward mobility of households, arguing that accumulation of wealth, repayments of debt, improved creditworthiness, and investing in assets become an important outcome of migration (Deshingkar, 2016). In her earlier work, (Deshingkar et al., 2008; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009) states that although most migrating families move with the hope of providing a better life for their children, “not everyone is fortunate enough to do this” (Deshingkar, 2016). In Dharmapuri, a few Vanniyar construction workers who have been migrating to Coimbatore for decades have been able to not only move out of the migration cycle permanently by setting up small, entrepreneurial ventures like grocery shops or small businesses, but have also been able to achieve better standards of living for their children by accessing valuable educational and employment opportunities at the destination. In contrast, for Dalit and Adivasi community workers, such opportunities are only seldom produced since these become a factor of—and are also actively restricted by—their social relations of production and their own immediate realities that are shaped by their caste background.

Our quantitative data also shows that the rural-urban transitions emerging out of Dharmapuri are well-structured. For instance, 44 per cent of members in migrant households across different caste groups find work in the destination location through a relative, whereas 34 per cent of members across different caste groups find work through a labour contractor/agent. In the case of Dharmapuri however, a good number of these “agents” are not labour recruiters who come from outside, as is seen in other north-Indian migration contexts as postulated by Jan Breman (1996) and David Mosse et. al. (2002). In Dharmapuri, the contractor/agent is a person from the village/community who migrated to the destination location some time earlier, which tells us that more than 50 per cent of people migrate through either a close relative or through a known person within the village/community.



The migration dynamics emerging from the district pose new challenges to how migration has been studied so far, especially in terms of the duration of migration. Ravi Srivastava mentions that existing National Sample Survey datasets do not capture the magnitude of short-term seasonal or circular migrants, primarily because “most seasonal and circular migrants, other than those in agriculture, migrate for longer periods than six months which was taken in these surveys as the upper limit for the duration of short-term migration” (Srivastava, 2020). The proximity of the primary destination centres, Bengaluru, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Erode, and Chennai, from Dharmapuri reduces the travel time considerably. Sarala Senthilkumar, head of an NGO in Dharmapuri, tells us that the construction of the new highway (NH-844) that connects Bengaluru to Dharmapuri began in 2019 and has been operational for the past few years. This new road has reduced the time travel between the two regions. Further, express trains that ply between the two locations have generated new narratives of migrant workers going to Bengaluru in the morning train and returning to Dharmapuri by night, all in the same day.

These cases problematise the current understanding of migration that national survey institutions possess, since the duration of migration of cyclical migrants in Dharmapuri is not only less than the upper limit of six months, but is also highly irregular. When migrant households were asked how often migrating members visit the source, an overwhelming number could not respond in a codified manner. While 21 per cent of responses told us that migrating members revisited the source at least every weekend or once a month, the large number of blank responses told us that spending a longer duration in the destination center was not a characteristic of migration emerging from the district.

Unlike most other examples of distress migration—a type of migration that describes disenfranchised workers driven out by collapsing agriculture only to be exploited by urban employers and contractors (Deshingkar, 2016)—workers in Dharmapuri seldom travel with their spouse and/or children. Members in just 12 surveyed households (8 per cent) in Dharmapuri had migrated with their respective spouses, informing us that a majority of the migration from Dharmapuri is single-male, short-term migration.

While migration from Dharmapuri meets the definition of distress migration, the reasons for such distress are not singular, but multidimensional (see Table 4). It is



true that much of the labour movement from Dharmapuri to neighbouring districts emerges from large-scale failures in agriculture, which are a result of the changing climate in the region. However, migration does not, in essence, effectively lessen the distress in any way as mentioned by scholars previously, but in ways only exacerbates it. The next few sections illustrate these points by looking into the socioeconomic and climatic transitions in the region.

5.2 Socioeconomic Transitions

Selvam,⁵ a ST migrant worker from Harur, travels to the teak estates in Malappuram district in Kerala as a timber-cutter. Young people from his village and surrounding areas also migrate to the same location for work. Sitting in a small teashop with two other workers who accompany him for similar work in Sittlingi, Harur, Selvam explained: “Our work is to basically cut wood in huge estates in Malappuram, which are then transported to companies that produce different kinds of furniture. For a full-day’s work, which could be anywhere between 8–10 hours, a skilled worker like me, who can operate the electric chainsaw, receives around ₹2,000–3,000/day. Normally, I find work there for at least 20–25 days a month, which consolidates my earnings to about ₹50,000–70,000 after deducting my own personal expenditure there.”

The other two workers with Selvam told us that unskilled workers also receive a wage rate of ₹1,500 a day, which is comparatively higher than most other sectors that migrant workers in Dharmapuri work in. As stated by Selvam, accommodation and food costs at the destination location become negligible, since these are provided by the estate owners. These workers usually spend about 25–26 days at the destination at a stretch, after which they return to Dharmapuri to spend a month or so with their families. This cycle continues for most part of the year, although they tend to spend more time in Dharmapuri during festival and harvest seasons.

These accounts, at the outset, tend to dismantle conventional understandings of migration; it is uncommon to see such high levels of income being generated in informal migration cycles and scholars so far have only hinted at the economic downside of such migration, especially with tribal communities and communities

⁵ Name changed



coming from the marginalised castes. In his work which comments on migration dynamics in Gujarat, Jan Breman (1996) talks about how debt bondage plays an important role in mobilising migrant workers, where 'jobbers' (contractors) usually pay a hefty sum of money as an advance to the worker at the beginning of the migration cycle (Breman, 1996). The worker, as Breman notes, is manipulated by different contractors to take multiple advances, pushing them into a relationship of dependency and bondage (Breman, 1996). David Mosse further adds on to this by saying that poorer communities are pushed into destitution due to debt, since they take high interest loans for agriculture which have to be serviced through migration. For poorer households, migration is a 'defensive coping strategy [that provides] the principal means for servicing high interest subsistence-related debts' (Mosse et al., 2002).

Some of these conventional understandings are offset in contemporary Dharmapuri, especially post-Covid period. From our conversations and structured interviews with migrant workers, we have come to understand that there is a complete absence of middlemen or contractors in Dharmapuri, since most of the migration occurs through close-bound familial/village-level networks. The penetration of contractors for recruitment from outside the particular village/town is very minimal. Because of this, the debt incurred by migrant workers at the beginning of the cycle is negligible. Beyond Mosse's perception of poorer households being pushed deeper into the debt cycle, the study found that several households in Dharmapuri district do take loans to finance agriculture and farming, especially those households which own a considerable tract of land.

The only argument that thus remains is one made by Mosse et. al. in their 2002 work, where the migration is not seen through the dichotomous lenses of push and pull, urban or rural, and structure or agency, and labour migration is not perceived as part of 'local and diverse livelihood strategies' (Mosse et al., 2002) alone. The dynamics of labour migration emerging out of Dharmapuri force us to rethink and revisualise earlier perspectives and understandings. Whether this is directly the fallout of neoliberal policy shifts of the last two decades is something that requires further probing.



5.3 Issue of Debt

One of our major findings from both our quantitative surveys and structured conversations with individuals and groups of workers is that debt is a common factor that cuts across communities. Most of this is generational, which grows exponentially with time. Individual households keep migrating in order to reduce this burden, but most members spend their entire lives just repaying interests, while the principal amount remains intact and unreturned. Out of the 150 migrating households that were surveyed, 139 (nearly 93 per cent) reported being in debt, where principal amounts ranged between ₹50,000 and ₹3,00,000. Of the households, 27 per cent had taken home loans, while others had taken agricultural loans, personal loans, vehicle loans, and educational loans.

The case of a high-income receiving migrant worker like Selvam becomes interesting here, whose average earnings are higher than most entry-level white collared formalized jobs. Our observation, not only with Selvam, but a vast majority of others coming from different communities was that an increased income level did not, in essence, change the debt statuses of households. For instance, Selvam himself had an outstanding debt amount (principal) of up to ₹4,00,000. He had taken small loans for multiple occasions, which had steadily increased to a large sum over time.

The story of Selvam is not unique to his community or geography but can be seen across Dharmapuri district. Sarala, who heads an SHG in Dharmapuri town that operates in almost all the talukas of Dharmapuri, tells us that the recent incursion of micro-finance institutions (MFIs) and other such private lending sources has made it increasingly easy for people to access huge amounts of credit. According to her, in most cases people availed this credit in an attempt to 'show-off' or out of greed. These views were also echoed by Dayanidhi in Harur, an ex-IT employee from Chennai who had returned to Dharmapuri to practice organic farming with a collective of small-scale farmers. Dayanidhi points out that the generational aspirations of families become the primary reason for such kind of debt accumulation and circulation, saying, 'the aspiration of members in a household increases when there is some amount of cash flow into the family'. For instance, as workers start entering into migration streams, the comparative cash flow into their households increases, which leads to an increase in access to credit and an increase in spending based on aspirations. Dayanidhi stresses that this must also be viewed



‘alongside the marginal improvement in standard of living conditions that comes with generational change, which again leads to greater aspirations. All of these factors result in the worker accessing more debt and spending more time in migration to pay-off this debt’.

As Jan Breman posits, these factors put the blame on the labourer, who ‘in his greed for credit, [had] craftily taken advance payments from different sides...’ (Breman, 1996). Although here there are no ‘advance payments’ being made to the worker, the point of credit-greediness is prevalent due to individual aspirations. However, it is important to understand how and why different communities take loans and how they then try to repay them. For instance, landholding communities in Dharmapuri continue to languish in debt due to climate variability in the region over the past decades that ruin their harvest:

S. Ramanujan,⁶ a local farmer from Chinna Thadangam village in the Dharmapuri block, comes from a dominant-caste background and owns about 6 acres of land. Out of this, around 2–3 acres of land have been completely ‘taken over’ by peacocks, restricting Ramanujan from practicing any kind of agriculture there. In May 2025, Ramanujan lost around ₹4,00,000 in a single harvest season due to untimely rains. Ramanujan’s rice crop was ready to harvest in the beginning of the month, when untimely rain and storms took him by surprise, completely destroying his harvest in about 3–4 acres of sown land. ‘I will now have to further take a loan to hire labourers and equipment to clear the field and prepare it for harvest, which will take at least another ₹20,000–30,000’, said Ramanujan, who had already taken heavy loans during last monsoon. Agricultural issues that are caused by a range of factors such as rain failures, animal attacks, lowering groundwater levels, droughts, pest issues, and increasing cost of production (seeds, labour, equipment, etc.) directly lead landholding, dominant caste families into debt, as can be seen from the data below:

⁶ Name unchanged



Figure 9: Ramanujam's paddy crops completely ruined by unprecedented rain during harvest time

Source: IIHS Media Lab

5.4 Conspicuous Consumption & Changing Aspirations

Within marginalised communities, the sources of debt differ; not all households fall into debt primarily because of agricultural failures due to the comparatively less landholdings that they possess. Most marginalised communities face debt issues because of health issues and for providing private education to their children. Of the total sample, SC and ST households form around 35 per cent (53) of the total migrant households surveyed across the three talukas. Out of this, close to 87 per cent (47 households) took non-agricultural loans, like home loans (purchasing/refurbishment), health loans, student/education loans, vehicle loans, and other personal loans.

These personal loans, as explained to us by Shankar (from Periyapatti village), are mostly used for purposes of social reproduction. Marriages, birthday celebrations, funerals, coming-of-age events, and other such communal events are the major



reasons for which people access debt at high interest rates. 'A worker in the same village who spent 30 years migrating for work in the construction sector in Coimbatore spent ₹20,00,000–30,00,000 for his daughter's wedding, for which he had to take some loan from local moneylenders at a high lending rate', said Shankar.

These constitute what Thorstein Veblen postulated as instances of *conspicuous consumption* in his 19th century work, where he relates the growth of surplus production and private property with the shifts in consumption patterns of individuals who began to consume products to emulate a certain lifestyle. Veblen states that people began to satisfy their need for self-respect not through reputable professions, but also via the acquisition, accumulation, and display of high-value goods (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012).

Tracing the evolution of this concept as posited by Veblen and other economists over time, Georgios Patsiaouras and James A. Fitchett state that it was only in the mid-20th century when such consumption grew, through the expansion of industrial capitalism and consumerism, where television ads 'produced increasing visibility of product images associated with social prestige and radically altered the communication of conspicuous consumption' (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). This, combined with expanding job mobility in the rising service sector in America, led to the creation of a new middle-class of white-collared workers, through whom the consumption of 'status conferring goods' (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012) and products that symbolised and emulated a certain social status increased.

These similar behaviours are portrayed by migrant workers in Dharmapuri, who desire that a certain social status be reflected in the source region as part of their migration outcome. Although Selvam earns an income hitherto unheard of in migration streams, and has a huge amount of outstanding generational debt, he had recently purchased a high-end model motorcycle which had cost him around ₹1,50,000. When asked why he thought of buying such an expensive two-wheeler, the response was that he had seen young people buy such expensive bikes on YouTube, which motivated him to also get one. 'Most youngsters who migrate out of Dharmapuri in search of employment use expensive two-wheelers and spend lavishly on ceremonies such as their birthdays etc. when they come back to the village', said Shankar. 'It becomes important in a way, since people in the village



expect that. They say that see, he is earning in Bengaluru/Coimbatore, he must have money to spend', said Shankar.

In their work, Patsiaouras and Fitchett mention how some scholars have attributed such consumption practices to being means of 'emancipation from [an] industrialised work life' (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Although this could be a possible explanation for conspicuous spending in the source region, in Dharmapuri, the practice of migrating becomes closely affiliated with emulating a certain kind of social status in the source region. It differs from hitherto definitions of conspicuous consumption in that it is not just limited to buying certain products that are expensive and help in emulating a certain status, but to spend extravagantly on occasions of social reproduction or by portraying an individual's spending power in the source region to emulate a sense of socio-political power. In the SC village where Shankar lives, statues of Ambedkar and a small reading room for young people who are preparing for Tamil Nadu Public Services Commission (TNPSC) exams have been built by migrant workers. These edifices carry the names of their donors, which reflect dual notions of both exerting a certain power in the village and also displaying a positive outcome of migration.

In the same work, Patsiaouras and Fitchett refer to Kenneth Gabraith's argument that 'the phenomenon of status emulation lies at the very heart of power politics...' (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). The symbolic value of erecting a statue or donating money to an *oor-thiruvizha* (village festival) possesses both social and political meaning. It becomes important to understand here that such exorbitant spending in the source region does not occur in a vacuum. For communities who have been hitherto marginalised, any opportunity to showcase an increased social standing is welcome, even more so in a volatile region like Dharmapuri which has seen, and continues to see, extensive caste and gender based violence.⁷ However, it would be incorrect to assume that the desire to emulate a certain social standing is limited only to marginalised communities—dominant caste communities in Dharmapuri showcase similar traits, where they spend huge amounts of money in the source region in festivities, trying to re-establish a sense of their hierarchical dominance. Festivals that are new to Tamil Nadu, like Vinayaka Chaturthi, have recently become

⁷ This is a reflection from our qualitative interviews from respondents, and needs deeper indulgence through further conversations that are centred around this issue.

opulent events that see an immense amount of cash-flow, almost at the same level as in some states. During our interviews, we understood that dominant caste communities in Dharmapuri district actively participate in these events by donating sums of money, most of which come from the remittance of migrant families. However, a lot of this is also financed by readily available loans at high-interest rates through a large network of local moneylenders or through political outfits.



Figure 10: A local Aiyyanar temple in Dharmapuri

Source: IIHS Media Lab

Thus, the issue of debt, incomes, consumption, and remittances play an important role in forging the socio-economic aspects of the region. Remittances, both financial and social, play an important role at the household level. Of the migrant households surveyed, 97 per cent rely on monthly financial remittances for their day-to-day expenses, which is received once a month by most households:

Families such as those of Panchali from Palacode taluka are completely dependent on the remittance her son sends every month. Panchali used to migrate to work in the construction sector with her husband. A few years ago, she stopped due to ill health, while her husband continued. 'He only earns for himself and his bottle,' shared Panchali, who herself works as a labourer in the nearby fields. 'My house runs



on the ₹10,000 I receive from my sons every month, who work in Tiruppur and Hosur', says Panchali, who uses the money not only for survival, but also for the debts that the family has incurred over time for the their daughter's wedding and other such events.

It is imperative to mention here that migration in Dharmapuri is not a source of income diversification as has been hitherto argued by scholars like Priya Deshingkar, leading to accumulation of assets over time (Deshingkar et al., 2008; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). In essence, there were very few avenues outside of migration for households in Dharmapuri district to augment their income. Apart from migrating, rearing of livestock (mostly cows and goats) marginally augmented incomes of a few households.

Milk conglomerates in Tamil Nadu like Aavin, Hudson, etc. have installed their collection centres across multiple villages in Dharmapuri, where villagers drop milk that they collect. People rearing goats usually also sell the milk and the meat. In all of these cases however, the addition to household incomes remains small, in some cases even negligible. Although it is difficult for us to comment on this with quantitative accuracy since our surveys were limited to migrating households, conversations with groups of villagers at different locations informed us that the increase in household incomes were marginal. In our conversations with women in the villages, they would point out that the money they earned from the cows or goats went into their care. This was also true for families who have multiple cows. As explained by a woman villager, 'In most cases, what I earn from milking these cows goes into caring and buying fodder for them. If I am able to earn monthly ₹10,000 from them, it is only rarely that I will spend ₹8,000 on rearing and keep the ₹2,000 as earnings. Usually, I end up spending ₹10,000–12,000 on them every month, leaving me with nothing as earnings.'



Figure 11: Vehicle carrying milk from the local collection centre in a village in Dharmapuri to the processing unit
Source: IIHS Media Lab

5.5 Environmental and Climatic Transitions in Dharmapuri

Veni from Babynamarudahalli village in the Dharmapuri taluka travels with Balaji, her younger son, to Ernakulam every fortnight to work as street vendors selling vegetables there. Rajendran, Veni's husband, lives and works as a construction worker in Erode for close to 20 days in a month, leaving his family behind. Suresh, the eldest son, is the only member of the family with a formalised, regular salary, who works in the nearby Rural Development Office of the Nagarkoodal Municipality, Dharmapuri.⁸

Rajendran and Veni own less than an acre of land, where they mostly grow *manjal* (turmeric). In September of 2024, Veni told us that 'This year, the *mahasul* (yield) has not been so good. Most of what we sowed was ruined by wild pigs, while the rest dried up as there were no rains last year.' When probed more on the animal issues they face in their fields, Veni explained that '...there are no rains; the forests have completely dried up.'⁹ All the animals in the forest enter and attack farms and agricultural fields in search of water and food.'

⁸ All names unchanged

⁹ The term she used was *varatchi* (வறட்சி) which translates to drought in Tamil



Figure 12: A dry farmland in the Pennagaram Taluka
Source: WWF Research Team

Veni's story is not uncommon in Dharmapuri. Erratic climatic behaviour observed in the recent past has altered traditional mechanisms of agriculture, forcing farmers and agricultural labour to increasingly depend on migration or financial remittance received through migration for their survival. As mentioned in the introductory sections, Dharmapuri has not only been observing rising distinct land surface temperatures over the course of the past decade (Rajendran & Venkatasubramani, 2017), but has also recently been through extreme climatic events of dryness and inundation within the same calendar year, exacerbating the issues for individuals in the district who are largely dependent on agriculture as their primary source of income.



As displayed in Figures 11–13, all the three talukas where the survey was conducted report issues that directly allude to decreasing water and rain failures as one of the major challenges they face in farming and agriculture. Although the region has always practiced dry land agriculture, with most of the produce being dependent on timely monsoons, the recent shifts in these climatic events have altered how farmers practice agriculture:

Duraimani runs an SHG in the Pennagaram taluka and comes from Malaiyur village, in the Pikkili Panchayat of the same taluka. Duraimani's elder brother Murugesan practices dry land agriculture in the uneven terrains of Pennagaram, sowing mostly grains and pulses that were majorly used for household consumption. Duraimani and Murugesan own small tracts of land that run adjacent to their village, which are bordered by deep valleys on the other side. The terrain itself, as mentioned earlier, is uneven, but also at a higher altitude as compared to most other regions in the taluka.

Even during 'normal' days, as explained by Duraimani and Murugesan, agriculture is difficult because of water run down issues and other difficulties that arise from

practicing agriculture in an irregular terrain. Recently however, rains have failed in the village, and the land remains un-tilled. On our visit in mid-May 2025, Duraimani told us that ‘...till a few years ago, we would start tilling the land around March–April. We would ‘run’ the plow through the land multiple times during this period, and by May, the land would be sown with seeds, aligning perfectly with the arrival of rains. Last couple of years the rains have failed or been erratic. As result, this year, our land remains completely un-tilled.’

Gopal, another farmer and a friend of Murugesan who owns a strip of land adjacent to Murugesan and Duraimani’s family, said ‘I had sown ragi (millet) early this year, which was mostly growing fine. Suddenly, during the time of harvest, elephants from the valley destroyed my crops. I lost around 200 kgs of my yield.’



Figure 14: Land remains un-tilled in Malaiyur, due to rain failures
Source: IIHS Media Lab

These narratives allude to the dual issues of the region, where uneven terrain combined with climate change magnifies the challenges that farmers face in the region. In the case of unavailability of water, Duraimani’s family has taken up planting Kaakanam and Kanakambharam flowers in small gardens. These flowers open up a meagre source of income in the household, although the challenge of wild animals ruining the crops still looms large.

The story of Malaiyur is important also because it is a small village, with only 250 families. The village only has a middle school, forcing older children to travel downhill



for around 10 kms to Pikkili for high school. Around two decades ago, there was no proper road that connected Malaiyur to Pikkili, even when the residents kept protesting and petitioning for it to the local municipal bodies. Residents who were associated with trade unions and progressive political parties took it upon themselves to clear forests and create a 15 feet wide dirt road, which only recently was converted to a tar road by authorities.



Figure 15: Floriculture at Malaiyur village
Source: IHS Media Lab

Malaiyur also has a history of migration. Residents like Gopal were migrating to work in the construction sector in Bengaluru at least 30–40 years ago, after which eventually stopped and returned to agriculture. In recent times, as more younger people migrate to work, older people like Gopal stay behind and try to practise whatever agriculture they can. Some residents—including some migrant workers—who are comparatively better off have installed bore-wells in their fields that go as deep as 900 ft., costing lakhs of rupees. Some of them have also resorted to planting different crops, but none of these have alleviated the people from either their dire financial circumstances or have substantially changed their livelihoods in any manner.

The issue of wild animals has been particularly notorious across the Dharmapuri district. Many farmers, like Gopal, have lost their bountiful harvest to wild animals, which destroy the crops right before harvest. In Palacode taluka, for instance, wild boars had completely uprooted and destroyed peanuts that a farmer had planted. Rajalingam, a resident of the district and grassroots animal-rights practitioner, has run an organisation called Thainadu Animal Live-Stock Protection Welfare and Development Trust (TAPWT) since 2006. It mostly focuses on providing medical aid, food, protection, and burials for animals in the region. During an interview on animal-human conflict, Rajalingam unequivocally stated that ‘Although animals usually are seen as a medium of support and assistance to farmers, in Dharmapuri, the equation is completely negative. Animals have only proved to be detrimental to farmers and their work, which can only be rectified through the collaboration of the government, NGOs, and the agriculturalists.’



Figure 16: Crops ruined by wild animals in a village near Dharmapuri
Source: IIHS Media Lab

Rajalingam agrees that the gradual drying up of the forests have forced animals out, which end up in nearby agricultural fields looking for water. Talking about instances that he has observed in the field, Rajalingam mentions that in the past year at least 200 farmers have been affected by peacocks, wild boars, elephants, deer and monkeys that destroy their crops. He adds, ‘We have tried a lot to advocate with the

forest department, and we have also presented them with actual remedies that will work to save farmlands, like establishing low-voltage electric fencing which will only deter animals from entering fields and not harm them physically. These are operative in nearby districts. However, the forest department is yet to seriously implement any of these changes at the ground.'. In fact, talking to farmers helped us understand that the forest department has only added to the challenges by imposing hefty fines on farmers even for attacking animals in self-defense. Farmers told us that these fines are almost ₹30,000–35,000 for attacking/injuring/killing a wild boar, while even slightly injuring a peacock can lead to legal confinement.



Figure 17: Peacocks seen from a distance in an agricultural field in Dharmapuri
Source: IIHS Media Lab

The TNSAPCC draft document, talking about the intricate relationship between changes in temperature and rainfall and habitat, mentions that forests too could be affected because of such changes in climate. In fact, the document also suggests the ‘...possibility of a reduction in the suitable habitat of semi-evergreen forest in the future...’,(State Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019) which would exacerbate these issues in the future.



Such problems, however, are not uniform across the district. Dayanidhi, who practices organic farming with a collective of farmers in Harur taluka, tells us that although animals come by sometimes, decreasing water has not been an issue in that region as far as agriculture is concerned. Talking to *Navadhanya*, a collective of dry land farmers that operates from the Pennagaram taluka helped us understand the region farmers mostly face water run-down issues during monsoon due to the uneven terrain of some areas. Navadhanya, which is also affiliated with a locally run NGO called SEEDS, actively collaborates with farmers to try and devise measures that will assist them, like building catchment areas and check-dams.

5.6 Urban Transitions in Dharmapuri

Shahira Banu¹⁰ works as non-contractual kitchen staff at the DNC theatre in Dharmapuri town, a multi-screen theatre that operates out of the DMAX mall that opened two-and-a-half years ago. Employed by the theatre authorities, Shahira earns around ₹14,000, out of which regular PF deductions are made every month.

‘My work mostly involves serving food that chefs in the kitchen prepare for the theatre customers. I also take care of other operations inside the kitchen. A normal shift in the theatre is for 9 hours, but shift timings change according to a roster. I sometimes have to work the night shift, which starts at 4:30 pm and ends at 1:30 am at night, after the last show. My shift includes an hour-long lunch break and two tea breaks’, says Shahira.

Shahira lives in the town in a rented accommodation with her family of four. Her husband sells vegetables in the local farmer’s market (*uzhavar sandai*). For Shahira, the employment opportunity at the theatre allows her to not only contribute financially to the family, but also to take care of her own expenses.

Ponnamma¹¹ lives in Chinna Thadangam village, 7–8 kms from the main Dharmapuri town. She works in ‘Unlimited’, a popular clothing brand. Kanniamma’s husband, who had passed away recently in an accident, used to make and sell ice-creams in the town. Both of her sons work in the IT sector in Chennai and Dharmapuri respectively. Almost two years ago, when malls and shopping complexes were coming up in

¹⁰ Name unchanged.

¹¹ Name changed



Dharmapuri town, Kanniamma joined 'Unlimited' as a housekeeping staff at a salary of ₹9,500. She was contracted to work there by people largely unknown to her and her family. Today, Kanniamma earns around ₹11,500, with no PF deductions or any other kind of social security measure. She works 9 hours a day for 6 days a week. She also does not know if she is eligible for promotions or increments or even if the increments are made as per her paygrade.

'Unlimited is a big brand now, with around 23 staff who are mostly locals. Even the managers come from Harur and Thoppur only', says Kaniamma. When asked who the customers were, since the shop sold big brands, Kanniamma responded, 'Most customers are locals who live in the town, although the sales are not that great.'

Over the course of our study in the district, we have witnessed a gradual change in the edifice of Dharmapuri town. With increasing consumerism and consumption, as explained in the sections above, there has been a recent influx of big clothing brands (like Zudio, Indian Terrain and John Players), jewellery shops, mobile phone reseller showrooms (like Poorvika), theatres, malls, and restaurants across the region. The coming up of such spaces in Dharmapuri indicates the growth of a new consumer base that have shifted to big brands for their immediate consumer needs.



Figure 18: Jewellery shop and real estate hoardings in Dharmapuri
Source: IHS Media Lab

Shahira and Kanniamma's accounts also indicate the dichotomy of urban growth in general. While Shahira's job is comparatively secure with benefits, Kanniamma continues to toil under contractual employment with minimal or no understanding of how the system works. However, this does not pit DMAX as a better employer than Unlimited. During conversations with Shahira, we learned that the theatre has recently hired a group of Assamese workers, who receive monthly wages to the tune of ₹10,000–12,000, and are not provided with social security. The low wage rates of both Kanniamma and Shahira themselves notwithstanding, these practices adopted by urban centres of employment—malls, shopping complexes, theatres etc.—tell us that such capital driven urbanisation will always move towards informal employment, especially in a country like India where labour is both in abundance and exploited due to a notable absence of the state in regulation.

On the other hand, this kind of urban growth has in itself introduced dichotomous debates within the civil society of Dharmapuri. While some view them as 'generating employment' in a region which is extremely backward, most others find these opportunities problematic which do not guarantee security to its workers. The



conventional debates surrounding modernisation notwithstanding, such transformations also raise the question of capital flows: who is investing in building malls and who is buying products that are sold there? Although there could be reminiscences of David Harvey's arguments of abundant capital and labour in a region like Dharmapuri coming together to restructure the built environment, such queries lay currently outside the purview of this study.



06

Exploring Just Transition





6 Exploring Just Transition

The climate crisis of the 21st century has become more palpable in the past decade—every 1°C temperature rise in global average temperatures will result in approximately 15–16 per cent loss of species across different ecosystems and a 3°C has the potential to wipe out about half the species (Ghotge, 2018a).

The past decade has since seen states converging at the global stage around the idea of collective action towards reducing carbon emissions and transitioning towards a low-carbon emission socio-ecological system (García-García et al., 2020; Winkler, 2020). The transition from the present socio-ecological (and also political-economic) system that is highly dependent on fossil fuels for its energy requirements to a system that is more ‘green’ and fosters the evolution of a sustainable regime lies at the crux of the energy transition debates. The emergence of the latter ‘new’ system entails the dismantling of older institutions, rearranging of policies and economies and a shift in how energy is stored, used, and distributed (García-García et al., 2020).

The practice of advancing the idea of justice within this larger paradigm of transitions is aimed at reconciling the ‘historical opposition’ between the narratives of global environmental justice and international labour movements, which stress that a transition to sustainable energy resources should be socially just and leave no community behind (Winkler, 2020). The focus, thus, is not only on ensuring the development of zero-carbon regimes, but also ensuring that the development pathway so chosen also leads to zero poverty (Winkler, 2020).

Several approaches, arguments, and debates focus on the question of how then, can just transitions be achieved for the working class which invariably comprises the most marginalised communities: low-income groups, women, racially and ethnically ostracised communities, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Velicu & Barca, 2020). Most of these approaches tend to re-emphasise ‘Green Keynesianism’, (Ghotge, 2018b) which revolves around replacing carbon intensive processes with ‘green processes’, developing clean technologies, improving efficiency in industries through process and material redesign, and recycling of waste—most of which will follow a market-based greening model by actively collaborating and giving more importance to the public sector (García-García et al., 2020).



This amalgamation of a Keynesian political economy that focuses only on privatising global common property resources and empowering global capitalist control (Ghotge, 2018b) with the superficial ‘greening’ of socio-ecological processes tends to leave out structural questions on how the green processes can ensure equality in the new system. Authors have theorised widely on the concept and designed explanatory models that broadly explain the processes by which change agents can coalesce around the ‘ideology’ of just energy, and then garner larger support at the national or the global level to then transform material conditions that lead to a zero-carbon and zero-poverty regime (Winkler, 2020). Nevertheless, as Newell points out in his work, such theorisation largely leaves out the questions of ‘politics and power and usually [does] not go beyond specific management strategies of governance practices’ (Newell, 2019). Moreover, since we also do not know who are these ‘change agents’ who coalesce around the idea of just transitions to bring about a change in the society, there is always a chance that the bourgeoisie can appropriate and co-opt such ‘dangerous’ (Newell, 2019) ideas within the folds of capitalism, thus reducing the concept to a mere transition, and not a transformation of systems (Newell, 2019).

Subsequent authors also point out that literature surrounding just transitions within the Green Keynesian or Green New Deal (Ghotge, 2018b) approach creates a rhetoric of compensations paid for actual losses of land and resources that does not ensure redistribution (Velicu & Barca, 2020). Within this paradigm, the situation of labour becomes complicated since the initial struggles of labour movements were to ensure no job losses during and after the period of transition. Within the capitalist mode of production, workers and labourers have no control over the means of production and enter into certain social relations of production based on their productive forces for mere survival. The wage relations of the worker become their self-identity. The ‘just’ part in the just transitions therefore must move beyond just ensuring ‘green’ jobs to the working class, which is assumed as the first step in gaining more political control, but also envision the working class as equal participants with political agency from the beginning (Newell, 2019).

This is precisely why Ghotge reaffirms the importance of ‘Green Socialism’, which as an alternative of capitalism reinvigorates the importance of a historical materialist approach within climate change and just energy paradigms. Rather than viewing just transitions in isolation, this approach emphasises ‘identifying the



underlying political, historical and material factors that enable large-scale transformations’ (Newell, 2019).

In a similar manner, our approach of trying to understand just energy transitions in Dharmapuri district in the context of climate-induced as well as climate-augmented migration will employ an approach that does not view these factors in silos. In fact, the study provides fresh insights to look at just transitions with a strong historical materialist approach.

The TNSAPCC draft document provides detailed descriptions of the linkages between climate change and the energy supply sector, indicating how the changes in the former can impact the latter. The document states that extreme weather events—such as change in water temperatures, frequent storms and precipitation patterns—can lead to an alteration or reduction in electricity production, hydropower generation, supply and quality of fuel like coal, oil and gas (State Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019). It is within this paradigm that we situate our explorations of just transitions in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu.

The Tamil Nadu Climate Change Mission, on the other hand, mentions the effect of climate change extensively in the field of agriculture as an occupational sector, stating that a projected decrease in soil moisture and a similar projected increase in drought days could adversely affect the ‘local food security and livelihood security of people’ (Department of Environment, Climate Change and Forest, 2023). The document stresses on consolidating resources towards building climate-smart agriculture in Tamil Nadu, which promotes practices like organic/natural, water-efficient farming. A transition towards climate-smart agriculture, thus, includes introducing new farming methods leading to the development of ‘climate smart villages’ (Department of Environment, Climate Change and Forest, 2023) that will demonstrate community-level resilience measures by combining adaptive agriculture, renewable energy, and livelihood diversification.

This phenomenon of transition could be observed in Dharmapuri in the changing energy dynamics in the field of agriculture. As mentioned earlier, although Dharmapuri’s topography is not conducive to high-yielding agriculture typical of more fertile regions, it still is a primary source of livelihood for approximately 40 percent of the population. As mentioned already above, the increase in land surface temperatures, recurring droughts, reduced and erratic rainfalls in the district have led to decreasing agricultural yields. Moreover, the destruction of



crops caused by wild animals like wild boars, monkeys, peacocks, elephants has also led to severe losses for the agrarian population in the district.

In recent times, however, individual and community-based resilient strategies within agriculture such as drip irrigation, crop-rotation, organic farming have emerged in the district through individuals and collectives. Navadhanya Farmers' Collective in Pennagaram becomes a case in point where farmers have come together to actively seek resilient strategies against water run down issues that they face in agriculture. Through collective support and NGO oversight, they have been able to build small check-dams, tanks and reservoirs that have supported agriculture in some pockets.

Nevertheless, the TNCCM document does not, in essence, take into consideration the effects of climate change as observed in districts like Dharmapuri, where increasing shifts in the climate lead to distress migration as a means of survival. The document stresses on building resilience of communities where they are, without reflecting on the fact that Tamil Nadu receives a high number of migrant workers—even in its articulation of urban heat stress, the document does not specifically mention migrant construction workers as a highly vulnerable category. The document's focus on conventional agrarian and coastal regions of Tamil Nadu leaves out the narratives of the migrating population of Dharmapuri as covered in this study.



Figure 19: A drip-irrigation company in Dharmapuri
Source: IIHS Media Lab



Figure 20: Fields being irrigated through drip irrigation in Dharmapuri
Source: IIHS Media Lab

Dayanidhi's efforts in creating a collective of farmers who practice organic farming in Harur, called Thagadur Kalanjiyam, are an example of devising new resilient strategies in the wake of climate change. Dayanidhi mostly works with farmers with small landholdings, with an aim of assisting them in growing their crops organically. 'I practice AEA, otherwise known as Advanced Eco-Agriculture, with 10 farmers currently. If this focus group becomes successful, more farmers will be willing to join the collective and work with me', said Dayanidhi.

One of the most important interventions that Dayanidhi takes up through his collective is to reduce and completely restrict the use of pesticides or chemicals in agriculture. 'Organic farming also requires much less water as compared to other methods. That is why we are able to find success in an arid place like Dharmapuri', said Dayanidhi. In the six years since he has been doing this in his hometown of Harur after quitting his IT job in Chennai, Dayanidhi has been able to assist one farmer in earning around Rs. 75,000 as profit. Most farmers in the collective earn somewhere between Rs.30,000 - Rs. 40,000 monthly, and Dayanidhi aims to increase these earnings by collaborating with organic product resellers based in Bengaluru and Chennai.



Figure 21: Dayanidhi in his farmland where he practices organic cultivation
Source: WFF Research Team

Such transitions in agriculture notwithstanding, we argue here that these resilient strategies, in essence, are representative of a larger transition that the district is going through, wherein the knowledge systems, technical know-how, and resources are all either provided by or gate-kept by dominant-caste individuals. As a dominant-caste individual, Dayanidhi has talked to us about the issues that landowners face due to the out-migration of labourers from Dharmapuri, saying most land-owners leave their lands fallow since there is no one to work their fields. He also echoes views that are a derivative of his political affiliations with *Naam Tamizhar Katchi* (NTK), where a constant narrative of ‘us vs them’ is repeated in the context of migrants who are coming in from the north India, vis-a-vis the local population that is moving out. Dayanidhi sees migration as an issue for both communities, especially where local opportunities of employment are being taken away by ‘them’.

Using these arguments, dominant-caste landowning individuals like Dayanidhi are able to persuade Dalit agricultural labour back into agriculture by proposing the above-mentioned resilient strategies as important transitions. On the other hand,



this presence of the Dalit agricultural labour in the source location reaffirms the caste pride and power of the landholding castes, thus fulfilling their own dual purposes. For the Dalit labour themselves, this return affects their mobility and comparative sense of freedom that they experience during migration.

As mentioned earlier, the TNSAPCC 2019 says that Dharmapuri has shown high water vulnerability, while the state itself is predicted to see rising temperatures and erratic precipitation in the coming years. In the course of this research, we have also seen certain case studies in this regard as well as other, larger transitions occurring in the district:

Chinnaru is one of the major rivers that flow through the district of Dharmapuri. The river flows through Panchupalli, Amanimallapuram, Dollaikaadhu, Kodupatti, and drains into Kaveri through Hogenakkal. Panchupalli dam is at one end of the river, which provides water for irrigation and drinking purposes to various surrounding areas in the talukas of Palacode and Pennagaram. However, there is no structure to hold Chinnaru's water in the stretch of around 60 kms between Panchupalli and Hogenakkal. During our visit to Dollaikaadhu, a small waterfall area, villagers told us that, 'All the water falls through here and flows into the Kaveri without any use for us. It just all goes to waste. If there had been a dam that could be constructed here, our water needs would have been fulfilled'.

In February 2025, local newspapers in Dharmapuri carried the exciting news of a new dam being proposed to be built at Dollaikaadhu, thus restricting water flow in the area and building a catchment zone in the 60 kms distance between Panchupalli and Hogenakkal. The newspaper talked about how the dam will provide a catchment zone for about 2 thousand million cubic feet of water, which will in turn provide irrigation facilities to at least 100 villages by installing high-power motors that will carry water to agricultural fields in this area.

In Malaiyur village in Pikkili panchayat of Pennagaram taluka, we asked Murugesan about this news. 'This is good...' he said. 'But only good for the people who live below us in Pikkili. For us who live on the hilltop, the water will never reach us even with high-power motors or pumps', he said. Dollaikaadhu, the proposed location of the dam, is less than 10 kms from Malaiyur. 'For the authorities, it will be a challenge to try and figure out a way to provide water to us. Most probably then, it will flow past us and go to Pikkili and other villages, but never come to us', said Murugesan.

The incompetence of state departments and authorities in devising solutions for water to reach Malaiyur notwithstanding, the construction of a dam in Dollaikaadhu poses new questions to the just transitions narrative. The Dollaikaadhu waterfall where the dam is being proposed stands bordering villages on both ends, where communities of people live. Although there is jubilation among people about the new dam, there are no questions raised about these villages and these communities. If the upcoming dam is seen as a technological transition in the district that will alleviate majority of the problems that communities face, the technocratic aspect of it—large scale displacement, clearing of land and forest area, and some communities being completely excluded from the transition —remains unquestioned, or rather, unanswered.



Figure 22: Dollaikaadhu waterfalls, where a new dam is being proposed
Source: IIHS Media Lab



Figure 23: Villages in Pikkili Panchayat as seen from Malaiyur
Source: IIHS Media Lab



07

Urban Transitions in Dharmapuri



7 Urban Transitions in Dharmapuri

Durai¹² is a construction worker in Periyur village, Pikkili Panchayat, Pennagaram Taluka. He lives in a SC settlement in the village and has received secondary level education. He has been migrating to Bengaluru as a construction worker for over a decade, and lives in Periyur with his wife and children.

‘Before me, my father used to migrate to the same place as there was decline of farm work locally. It was through him that I got work under the same *mestri*’, Durai said. He works as a labourer on private construction sites, earning around ₹1,000 per day in Bengaluru. ‘After personal expenses, I am able to bring home around ₹15,000 after around 20 days of work. My entire family is dependent on this money, as I have no land’, said Durai. He was on leave at home when we were talking to him in his village. ‘I have come for my children’s admission in college’, Durai said.

Through the PMAY scheme, Durai has been able to build his own house, albeit after a lot of struggles and bribing. ‘The scheme clearly says that a portion of the contribution should be from our side, but it does not talk about the contributions I have to pay to the authorities to get the money released that is the government’s contribution’, Durai laughed as he remembered his ordeals. ‘Even today, the last few installments of the payments have been stopped. No one knows why.’

Periyur village might receive water if the dam on Dollaikaadhu is built. Durai told us that as of today, there is no water in the village even after digging bore-wells for more than a 1000 ft. The water sources and the ground water have depleted massively in the last few decades.

¹² Name unchanged

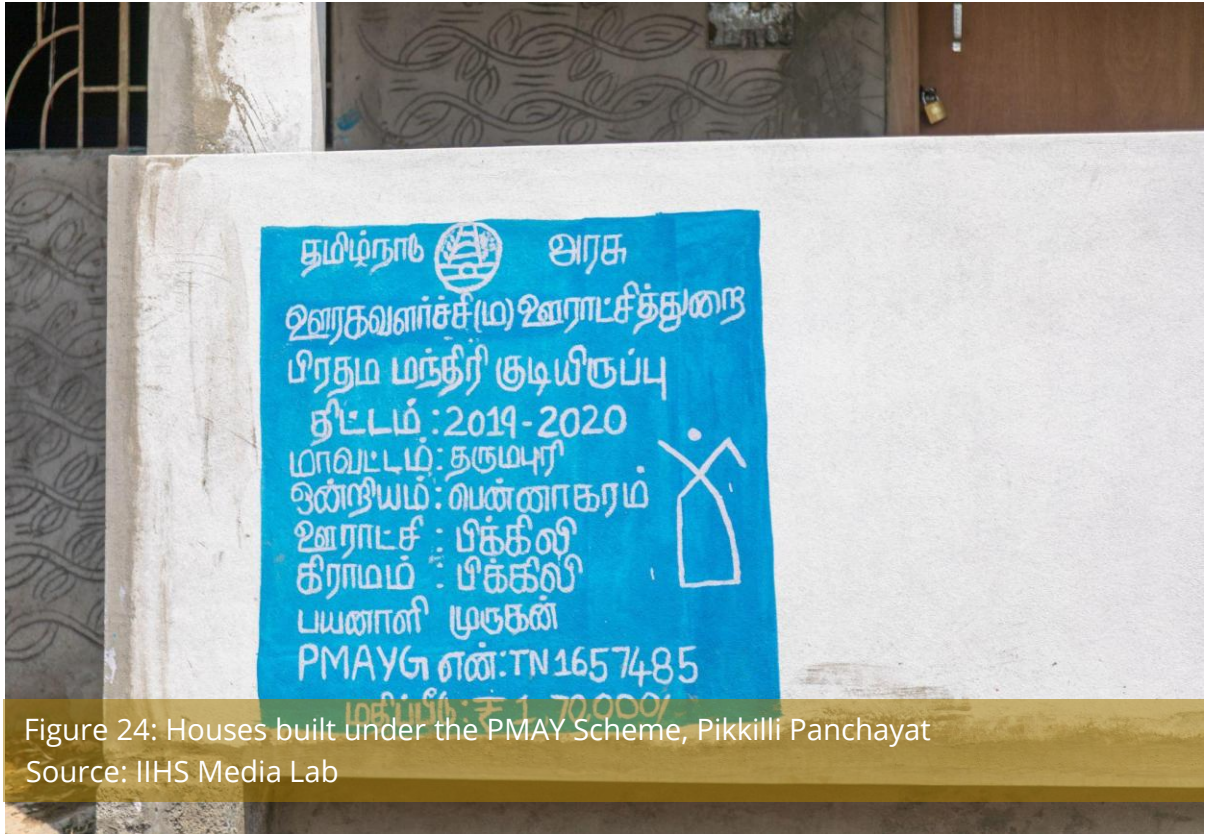


Figure 24: Houses built under the PMAY Scheme, Pikkilli Panchayat
Source: IIHS Media Lab

Nagaraj¹³ comes from a ST community in the Pennagaram Taluka of Dharmapuri. He migrates to different cities as part of his work with the forest department, under which he plants samplings on the highways, or becomes part of other afforestation efforts taken up by the Tamil Nadu government. Five years ago, Nagaraj used to work in brick kilns in Bengaluru, where he would take advance payments before travel. 'For four months of work at the brick kiln, I would get ₹4,000 as advance. If I came back before the tenure, I would have to return the entire amount to the contractor. I stopped doing that because the wage rates are very low. At the time I was working, the wage rates were ₹250 for 2,000 bricks', says Nagaraj. His current position is also under contract basis, where the state employs middlemen to bring in people like Nagaraj to work for them.

Nagaraj's brother is the head of the tribal village committee, who told us that the authorities in Dharmapuri have been blocking them from entering the forest to worship their ancestral deities due to the coming up of a wildlife sanctuary in the area. 'The government has earmarked land for the sanctuary randomly', says Nagaraj's brother, who echoes his brother's demands for land to be redistributed to marginalized communities like themselves. 'If we had at least 2 acres of land

¹³ Name unchanged



per household, then we could have at least had food to subsist. Now, for everyday subsistence, we need to take loans from moneylenders', says Nagaraj.

Although the demand for land is rightly put forward, there was little talk on how they would cultivate it in the changing climatic paradigms of Dharmapuri. Nagaraj himself told us that even drinking water is an issue in their village, and that rains have not been consistent in at least their surrounding areas for the past year. Yet, the demand is unequivocally placed on deaf ears for a perceived share in dignity and equal rights to livelihood.

The narratives of Durai and Nagaraj become a microcosm of the larger migration narrative that we observe in Dharmapuri. Both Durai and Nagaraj come from marginalised communities and have limited opportunities of employment in the district. Even while moving out, both follow a certain pathway that is unique to their community, village, and taluka. This is important to note because, as we have seen in previous sections, ST communities from Harur, a reserved assembly constituency in Dharmapuri, go to Mallapuram district in Kerala as woodcutters. Still, the narrative of these workers does not, in essence, form a homogenous account that could be comprehensively applied to all ST migrant workers in Harur. The data from this study tells us that some also move to other jobs that align closely with the networks an individual or a community has formed or is in the process of forming.

Even so, these accounts are still representative to some extent because the larger criteria remain similar across regions. For instance, migration from Dharmapuri remains largely connected to distress faced in agriculture due to extreme climatic events experienced by people over the past few decades. This either reduces subsistence opportunities at the source, or pushes people out in a bid to survive. Across communities, the issue of not being able to gauge dramatic shifts in climate, thus leading to heavy indebtedness is palpable. The study shows that the people in Dharmapuri district migrate essentially to not move upward from zero to one, but to move from minus one to zero, i.e., to be able to stabilise accumulated losses they have experienced over a certain period of time. The duration of migration and remittance are also comparable across communities. Durai and Nagaraj travel alone without their spouses or children and come back to the source after spending 15–20 days in the destination for work. Even Nagaraj, who had recently gone to Chennai for work, had come back after 20–25 days when we had the opportunity to interview him. This is also observed across



communities, where most people move for short durations across different distances.

These accounts, however, push the boundaries of previous theorisations within migration literature. Some of the issues of debt, consumption, duration, and distance of migration are comparatively new and under-explored. The findings from this study provide new implications to theories and policies that have been devised around migration. The study of migration in Dharmapuri district thus becomes a unique endeavour which requires deeper scrutiny and advanced resources that are able to do justice to the diverse issues that people face on the ground.

Although the larger mandate of this project was to explore ‘climate-induced’ migration, our work has hit upon something larger, which is more on the lines of climate-augmented migration.¹⁴ Our data and fieldwork on the ground with affected communities has not only helped in drawing a clear line between climate-change and migration, but has also helped us in understanding that rapid changes in climate is pushing people to a state of destitution, where the struggle is to not accumulate, but to stabilise. Increasingly, people are pushed out of farming and agriculture towards migration as it becomes increasingly difficult for communities to gauge changes and plan agricultural events.

We have mentioned earlier how climate change affects or can affect just transition mechanisms. Although drastic effects are not visible, there are resilience strategies coming up in the wake of climate-augmented migration. There is a technical shift that can be seen in agriculture, introduced by communities with access to different forms of capital. Larger shifts, such as the proposed dam construction that promises to alleviate water issues for thousands of people, are also witnessed within the district. Although nascent, these shifts are rarely just in nature, which informs us that the outcomes too might be unequal, leaving certain communities out of the perceived potential of a technological or institutional shift to better resources.

The determining factor, however, always comes down to structural inequalities among communities and the habitat they live in. In Dharmapuri, communities with different forms of capital, who, although continue to face losses in agriculture

¹⁴ As put forward by a fellow case study team lead, Benoy Peter from the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID, Kochi)



due to erratic climatic behaviour, have been able to employ resilience strategies that are localized, either within their immediate family or community. For instance, Ramanujan from Chinna Thadangam, who has been documented in this study as facing losses up to ₹4,00,000 in agriculture, does not migrate. He chooses not to, both because he receives remittance from his son who has a white-collared job and because his caste-identity as a Vanniyar deters him from seeking work as a casual labourer. 'The work I have put in maintaining my fields, if I had done that elsewhere, I would have received ₹1,000 a day ... But why should I go work for someone else leaving my own farm?', said Ramanujam.

As techno-based shifts occur in Dharmapuri in the wake of climate change, the negotiating power of people like Ramanujam changes, allowing them to bargain for more as compared to a Dalit labourer who has to migrate to work receiving meagre wages just to be able to subsist and provide for the family. Such differences might only become exacerbated in the wake of the sudden urban development that has blanketed the region, with skyrocketing real estate prices and transformations in the built environment. With the state being largely absent in these shifts, it becomes even more imperative to understand the implications this has, or might have, with migration and livelihoods of the people in Dharmapuri.

08

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