

Labour Contractors, Global Production Networks and CSR: Becoming and Being a Labour Contractor in the South Indian Garment Industry

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Introduction

Labour market intermediaries have long been the topic of scholarly research. Recently, they have received renewed attention among scholars of corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerned with the rise of labour contractors and other intermediaries within global production networks (GPN). In this literature, the informal labour contractor is often vilified as ‘unscrupulous’ recruiter of poor and vulnerable labourers for global capital, and represented in stereotypically negative terms as a key node in the extraction of surplus-value. In particular, concern has been raised about the inability of corporate codes of conduct to ‘reach’ some of the most vulnerable workers in global production networks, including the contract workers recruited through middlemen at the tail end of the chain (Barrientos 2008; 2011). As a result, labour contractors, and the contract and casual workers they recruit, have been named the ‘Achilles Heel’ of codes of conduct and considered the weakest point in the ‘chain’ of CSR control over GPNs (Barrientos 2008).

While not denying the role of labour market intermediaries in the reproduction of vulnerability, exploitation and inequality within local economies, this paper seeks to debunk the myth of the unscrupulous, rapacious contractor who is only out to exploit and abuse an already fragile labour force. Instead it seeks to redirect attention to the particular roles of contractors within local industrial clusters that increasingly feel the pressure of global commercial dynamics. Focusing on the social processes of becoming and being a labour contractor in a south Indian garment cluster, the paper

makes three arguments. First, it shows how the category of contractor is itself a highly ambivalent and unstable position within local labour processes. Contractors not only emerge from among the workforce, but in highly volatile and casual labour markets many of them keep ‘falling back’ into the position of worker. The boundary between *acting as* a contractor and *working for* a contractor is highly blurred and frequently crossed by many aspiring workers. Second, representations of contractors as unscrupulous exploiters ignore the complex social reality within which contractors act. Not only is their own ability and success as contractors conditioned by informal networks of caste, kinship and migration that temper their scope for unlimited extraction, but the workers they recruit are not even necessarily the most vulnerable workers in the chain. In fact, the ethnography that follows reveals that contractors operating within global production networks may well deal with highly skilled, outspoken and dynamic workers who do not hesitate to impose their own demands on them. Third, the social space covered by informal networks of labour recruitment and management constitutes a site of amazing entrepreneurship, skill acquisition and knowledge generation. The informal economy is not merely the territory of passivity and repression, it is also the space of creative self-fashioning and personal development through networked collaboration (Chari 2004). Moreover, informal spaces of networks and connections not only drive the social organisation of the economy at the bottom of the GPN pyramid, but it also reveals itself as a remarkable source of agency and ability for those whose working lives are otherwise marred by a systemic lack of opportunity and mobility.

Middlemen past and present, rural and urban, local and global

Today, we know a great deal about the rise and fall of labour contractors and middlemen in South Asia. Much has been written about labour intermediaries’ multiple roles as recruiters of labour, as supervisors at worksites, as labour organisers, as money lenders and providers of housing, and as headmen of various sorts (Roy 2008). Historians have dwelled at length on the role and rationale of the jobber, *sardar* or *maistri* in rising urban colonial industries, such as textiles, jute and mining, and have discussed the reasons for their decline and fall in the late- and post-colonial era (Chakrabarty 1989; Chandavarkar 1994; 2008; Roy 2008; Sen 2010). This historical scholarship carefully described the precariousness of contractors’ position

between management and the labour force that they mobilise. At times, this intermediary position is advantageous to them, allowing contractors to extract profits and become upwardly mobile, while at other times their intermediary position puts them in a vulnerable position within the labour process: unable to satisfy both labour and management, they are often liable 'to be squeezed by the contradictory pressures exerted upon them by both' (Chandavarkar 1994: 199). Sometimes this ruins their own 'careers' and relegates them back to the ranks of the workers from where they once rose.

More recently, attention has been turned towards the re-emergence of labour contractors across India's rural informal economy, especially in those sectors that rely on migrant labour. In a recent volume edited by Breman et al, the central role of labour contractors in the recruitment of workers has been documented with reference to different sectors across India, including brick kilns, rice mills, cane cutting and construction work (Breman et al 2009). Such research indicates the continued key role played by contractors in the contemporary rural economy: not only in recruiting and managing labour - especially migrant and/or seasonal labour - but also in the contemporary reproduction - and indeed intensification - of relations of dependency, debt and bondage (Guérin 2009; Prakash 2009; Roesch 2009).

While much of the emerging picture is less than promising, Picherit, in a study of labour middlemen in Andhra Pradesh, warns against reductionist representations of contractors as 'wicked persons who exploit and harass' and who should ideally be eliminated from the chains of recruitment (Picherit 2009: 263). Picherit makes the valid point that despite the availability of elaborate descriptions of middlemen's *structural* positions within the labour process, we know remarkably little about the person of the contractor himself (ibid.: 262-64). Contractors remain by and large faceless and stripped of any social identity or personal history, encapsulated as they are in a black-box 'category' that takes their origins, connections and authority for granted (Chakrabarty 1989; Picherit 2009: 263-64). Picherit, by contrast, argues that *maistris*' particular strengths and weaknesses are not merely the outcome of their structural location but hinge as much on the prestige and reputation that they are able to command, and the trust and loyalty that they manage to gain from workers - in other words, on the quality of their connections, networks and social relations (ibid.:

272-77). What is required therefore is a better understanding of how one becomes a labour contractor, who is able to join the ranks of this amorphous group, how they develop networks of recruitment, and how success or failure may ensue.

Finally, labour market intermediaries, whether as formal recruitment agencies or informal contractors, are on the rise globally. They proliferate not only as recruiters and middlemen within domestic economies, but they have also acquired new roles in facilitating and managing the mobility of workers across national borders (Coe et al 2007, Frantz 2011, Osella & Osella 2011, Peck et al 2005, Rogaly 2008, Wills 2009). Furthermore, labour contractors are also thriving within global production networks where ‘there is an increasing trend for producers to deploy labour contractors to facilitate the labour supply required to meet production schedules’ (Barrientos 2011: 8). There is evidence that both recruitment of migrant and temporary labour by contractors is on the rise within GPNs. The contradictory commercial dynamics behind this phenomenon has been well described by Barrientos (2008; 2011). Buyers and retailers are exerting pressure on suppliers to cut costs, reduce lead times, produce flexibly and meet ever exacting quality and ethical standards, including ever more rigorous labour standards. At the same time, price competition is cut-throat with buyers threatening to source elsewhere if standards are not met. As a result, suppliers increasingly rely on contractors and a casual workforce in an attempt to pass the costs and risks of production down the chain. The outcome is an environment in which contractors thrive, despite the subjection of producers to ever more stringent codes of labour practice (Barrientos 2008: 981-3; De Neve 2009). It is important to remind ourselves that the reasons for the proliferation of labour contractors are not of the suppliers’ own making, but are conditioned by the contemporary modes of governance by lead firms in GPNs who are increasingly removed from the labour they employ.

Hence, following Kelly, labour contractors need to be considered as a key node in the constellation of actors and institutions that together form the ‘local labour control regime’, which mediates global capital’s control over labour (Kelly 2001: 1-3). Capital’s grip over labour, especially within GPNs, is rarely exerted in a direct manner or, as Kelly puts it, ‘the relationship embodied in the labour process of newly industrializing spaces cannot be conceived simply as an antagonism between “global”

capital and “local” labor’ (ibid.: 1). Rather, this relationship is mediated through a range of institutions and actors, many of which exist outside the formal, regulatory sphere. In many industrial clusters, labour contractors are central to this mediation and, as unregulated actors, they play a vital role in the production of local labour processes. They not only supply labour – at the right time and of the right quality and quantity – but they also produce flexibility, entrepreneurship and skill within localised clusters that are incorporated within GPNs. In this sense, they are the rule rather than the exception, and are key to the functioning of informal, localised labour markets at the tail end of GPNs. However, it is precisely because of their locatedness outside the sphere of formality and regulation that they are hard to capture by corporate codes and other ethical standard interventions (Barrientos 2008). How they insert themselves within such labour processes and how they contribute to local labour control regimes is addressed in this paper.

Contractors in the Tiruppur garment industry, south India

In what follows I present ethnography from the Tiruppur garment manufacturing cluster in South India, where contractors have become an almost ubiquitous figure across export companies of various sizes. Tiruppur, located in the western part of Tamil Nadu, South India, is one of the largest knitwear garment clusters in South Asia and has known almost uninterrupted growth since the early 1970s when manufacturers began to trade with European buyers. Today, the cluster is a leading centre of garment exports for the world market and is well integrated into global production networks that stretch from Europe to the US and Asia. The cluster constitutes one of India’s important foreign exchange earners, with a total export value of Rs11,500 crore or \$2.5 billion in 2009-10, up from \$2 billion in 2007. Estimates suggest that there are about 10,000 production units in Tiruppur, employing more than 400,000 workers, but real numbers may well be higher than this (De Neve, 2003). Field research in Tiruppur included a worker survey, a firm survey, and interviews with workers, labour contractors and company management as well as with wider stakeholders such as trade unions and industrial organisations. The material presented here draws primarily on interviews and participant-observation carried out among workers and labour contractors in the factories and residential areas of Tiruppur.

In Tiruppur, labour contractors are widely deployed in CMT (cutting-manufacturing-trimming) units, where garments are tailored, checked and packed. Their contract with the producer or company owner typically consists of an agreement to produce a stipulated number of garments to a specified deadline, for an agreed payment and to a certain quality standard. Different contractors each take responsibility for a core operation on the shop floor, or a key process in the production of a garment. In any garment unit up to 4 or 5 contractors can be employed simultaneously to cover the core operations of cutting, tailoring, ironing, quality checking and packing. Raw materials and machinery are usually provided by the company itself, although an increasing number of cutting contractors now have a cutting machine of their own, which they take with them as they move between companies.

With most of the fixed capital provided by the company, the contractor's main task consists of recruiting a team of workers and getting them to work at such a speed and with such skills that the contract is completed on time and meets the required quality standards. On composing a team, the contractor divides the work among the team members, checks the quality of their work in production, keeps track of the speed, and pays his team members at the end of each week. The contractor is paid a fixed sum per contract by the company, which is usually negotiated at the beginning of each contract and is always calculated on a piece-rate basis. The contractor then pays his tailors or cutting masters either on a piece-rate or a shift-rate basis. What is left after payment of the team members is a commission for himself to reward his work, including the risks it involves. The main point to make here is that the contractor is a key figure on the shop floor: he monitors the entire production process, is the primary supervisor of his team of workers, allocates jobs to team members, trains less experienced workers, speeds up slackers, and solves quality problems of all sorts.

Under this system, the bulk of the workforce is directly employed by the contractor and not by the company itself. How this serves the needs of local (and global) capital is obvious: suppliers can restrict their dealings with labour to a handful of contractors, thus freeing up time to focus on marketing, sample development, and external relationships with buyers and jobworkers. Employing labour contractors also allows companies to benefit from a flexible workforce to whom they have no long-term

commitments, while avoiding the day-to-day management of labour. In case of any labour discontent, workers can be readily referred back to their contractors. While contractors are widely deployed by small and medium-sized company owners, even large export firms rely for at least some of their operations on contractors. For most firms, the contract labour system is not a matter of choice. It is increasingly the only method of recruitment that can provide the flexibility required by the global production networks for which they produce. The importance of labour contractors transpires from the perennial concerns faced by those export companies that try to avoid contract labour and register hundreds of workers on a regular pay roll. Those companies admit struggling with high rates of labour turnover and absenteeism, enhanced labour costs (given that payment is required even on days without work), and the complexity of managing a huge labour force in the light of constantly changing product lines and skill requirements.

Locating the contractor: shifting grounds and ambivalent positions

Having outlined the location of labour contractors in Tiruppur's garment industry, I now turn to the shifting grounds on which contractors operate. The trajectories that follow are typical but not exhaustive. They are meant to illustrate the diversity of routes by which workers become contractor, the social networks they mobilise, and the vulnerabilities they are exposed to. The precariousness of the contractor's position is revealed, both vis-à-vis their employers and the workers they recruit. It is ethnography collected on the shop floor of a small production unit, Modern Fashions, and in the neighbourhood around it, that provides the bulk of the evidence.

Senthil, the 'local' contractor

It was Senthil's father, Kumarasamy, whom I met first in January 2009, when sitting in the small and sweltering office of Modern Fashions. I had just told the company owner that I was interested in working in his company in order to gain a better understanding of the production process and the workers. The owner immediately called Kumarasamy, the powerable contractor, to his office and told him to introduce me to garment work. 'He will show you around and tell you everything you want to know; he knows everything about garment work – you can spend as much time with

him as you like!’ the owner added. This was how my free and unrestricted access to the shop floor of Modern fashions began. Over the following six months I worked there - on and off – as a helper assisting powerable tailors, and gradually came to know most people in the company as well as many others who used to walk in and out, such as quality controllers, suppliers, subcontractors and, not in the least, the family and friends of tailors.

Kumarasamy, aged 55, took me straight to the powerable machines where he put me on a chair next to his son, Senthil, aged 26, who he introduced to me as ‘the contractor’. In fact, I soon realised that Senthil and his father jointly manage the contract, and Kumarasamy is in many ways the driving and guiding force behind the scenes. Senthil soon started to chat to me, in Tamil but with lots of English sentences thrown in, and in no time recounted the main phases of his life, which he further detailed in subsequent conversations. In telling his life story, he was at least in part trying to justify why, given his high level of education, he had ended up working as a manual, albeit highly skilled, labourer in a Tiruppur garment workshop.

Senthil started by saying that he was born and brought up in Tiruppur and introduced to powerable tailoring at a very young age while assisting his father after school and during holidays. At the age of 16, having completed 10th class, Senthil went to Bangalore where he worked for a year. As he didn’t particularly like the work, he returned to Tiruppur to complete his 12th class. At the age of 18, but already fully skilled as a tailor, he took up a job in a garment company. Soon after, with the support of his parents, he started a degree at Ooty’s Government Arts College, where he graduated in 2004 with a BA in Defence and Strategic Studies. On his return to Tiruppur all hell broke loose when he revealed that he had married a Muslim woman three years earlier and that he had a three year old daughter with her. All this had happened without the knowledge of his parents, and when he brought it out three years later, his father’s – and indeed entire family’s - reaction was understandably one of disbelief, outrage and betrayal. ‘If she had been of the same caste, they could have accepted’, Senthil explains, ‘but a Muslim girl ...’. And that too an uneducated girl, from a poor migrant family from Madurai, who had lost her father and had to work as a tailor in the industry.

For Senthil's father it shattered an already fragile dream to come up in life. Kumarasamy's own father had been a mill worker and Kumarasamy had started tailoring from the age of 10 onwards. For more than 20 years, he had worked hard as a contractor, saved some money, educated his sons – Senthil's older brother got a BSc Degree in Physics and currently works as a successful cutting contractor -, and struggled against all odds to do well. Indeed, the classic but powerful male dream in Tiruppur is to one day set up one's own company and to make the transition from worker to employer (Chari 2005; De Neve 2003). Yet Kumarasamy had not been lucky and did not hide his unfulfilled aspirations and his sense of a perennial uphill struggle. Senthil's secret love marriage to a Muslim girl was certainly a major setback to his father's plans to start up a garment unit with his two sons. On hearing of the love marriage, all communication broke down between father and son, and on his return from Ooty in 2004, Senthil started working as an already skilled tailor and later as a contractor. At some point he also set up a small unit with two friends, investing Rs 40,000, and they manufactured garments for the domestic market. Unfortunately, as often happens, the partnership didn't last and within the first year the company had to close down. Senthil broadly agrees that his family has not had much luck over the last years. Because of his love marriage he lost all support from his father and ended up living with his wife and daughter in a small one-room flat in a poorly maintained government block. However, as time passed, Senthil's relationship with his parents was gradually restored, and after a while Senthil and his father began to work together as contractors. To do well as a contractor, family support is crucial and the chances of succeeding in the industry are greatly enhanced if several family members pool their skills and expertise. Senthil realised that his father's experience and support were vital to his own development, while his father similarly knew that there was little he could develop without the support of his sons. By the time I arrived in January 2009, Senthil and his father were taking regular powerable contracts in Modern Fashions in the centre of Tiruppur, and had been working steadily as contractors for about two years.

Senthil's brother, Rajan, however, was doing very well managing several teams simultaneously as a cutting contractor. His arranged marriage in 2007 to a woman from a nearby village means, his father emphasised, that he receives a lot of 'support' from his wife's family, and in the course of 2009 Rajan purchased a plot of land for

more than Rs 2 lakh, on which he was planning to build a house. Support of one's family - on both sides - is crucial for young couples to manage married life in Tiruppur, especially given the frequent fluctuations in employment and thus household income. Senthil would often mention that because of his love marriage, he and his wife get no support from their families and are therefore unable to buy a property or start up a business. While there is some truth in this, the lack of support from his wife's family has as much to do with their own poverty. Senthil's widowed mother-in-law and his still unmarried brother-in-law are struggling to keep their own heads above water, and have very little to pass on to Senthil anyway. While there is no doubt that Senthil's love marriage has made his own father much less forthcoming with financial assistance, he does get important support from his father in at least two ways. One is help in managing the contracts that Senthil takes on – his father works alongside Senthil as part of the same team. The other relates to the way in which the income from the contracts is divided: Senthil gets to keep Rs 3,000 of the roughly Rs 4,000 per week that they jointly earn.

One of the main advantages of Senthil's family in Tiruppur is that they are locals. Families with long-term roots in Tiruppur (many of whom are Gounders or Naickers, like Senthil) often own land in town, have properties to rent out, run their own companies, and are involved in money lending. As property prices have soared over the last couple of decades, many locals have made fortunes overnight. This is also the case of Kumarasamy. At some point, Kumarasamy sold the house he owned to buy a larger plot of land. While he paid Rs 15,000 for the land, about 15 years ago, it is now worth Rs 25 lakh. His plans are to build some houses on it and rent them out to migrant workers, and earn a regular monthly income. At the moment, however, it is his money lending business that is the most reliable source of income. For more than 15 years, Kumarasamy has been acting as a money lender, 'not on a large scale', he explains, 'but I give Rs 2000 or Rs 3000 to people here and there and then collect interest.' In fact, he has between Rs 2 and 3 lakh in circulation, and every Wednesday morning and Sunday morning, he does a round of money collection before making his way to the company. Such additional income flows allow local families, like that of Kumarasamy, to save, invest and spend, and above all to deal with gaps in employment or delays in payment, both of which occur on a regular basis in the industry. While Senthil may not receive direct cash to set up a company, he certainly

benefits from his family's overall financial security, social networks and human capital, of which his education is a direct proof. Together with his father he has done well as a powerable contractor over the last few years - even though orders do not always come in as regularly as he would like. Family support and social capital in Tiruppur are key to any garment workers' success in establishing themselves as contractors and to their ability to remain afloat in what is a highly volatile and unstable labour market.

Mohan, the settled migrant, the unsettled contractor

But not all contractors are equally well endowed with social and financial capital. Mohan's life history as a settled migrant in Tiruppur presents us with a different employment trajectory and social environment. I first met Mohan when he worked as a singer tailor in Modern Fashions in December 2008. Although he is known as a *veliyur aal* or 'person from outside' - commonly distinguished from the *ullur aal* or 'locals, born and brought up in Tiruppur' - Mohan doesn't go back all that often to his home city of Madurai (160 km south of Tiruppur) and very much thinks of himself as a local. It was a failing tailoring shop and debt that drove his father, Pandian, to migrate to Tiruppur in 1997, along with his wife, 7 sons and daughter. For most of Pandian's children the move to Tiruppur meant the end of their schooling, with most of them having completed only class 5 or 6. As for most migrants, the move to Tiruppur calls an end to their children's education, especially when they are already in their early teens and employable in the garment sector. For Pandian, the need to earn enough to survive in town, to repay outstanding debts in Madurai, and to finance the upcoming marriages of his oldest children made the early employment of his sons unavoidable. While Pandian blames himself for failing to educate his sons, his own tailor shop – first in Madurai and later in Tiruppur - provided an excellent training ground for his sons, five of whom are now working in export companies as skilled singer tailors and one as a skilled powerable tailor. Moreover, two of them became labour contractors in their early twenties and all of them earn today what are widely considered to be the most desired wages in Tiruppur's garment sector. Mohan, Pandian's third son, is one of them.

Mohan was 16 when they arrived in Tiruppur. Having left school in class 5, Mohan is unable to read or write English and struggles with writing Tamil. He learned singer tailoring in the shop of his uncle in Madurai and became a skilled tailor who found immediate employment in the export garment industry on their arrival in Tiruppur. Aged 28 now, Mohan has worked for different contractors and follows them to wherever a team of singer tailors is needed. At times he also works as a contractor himself, as we will see below. Permanently settled in Tiruppur and with his mind firmly focused on the possibilities for future development in the garment industry, Mohan rarely dwells on where his family came from or what caused their poverty. As far as Madurai is concerned, he only goes there once or twice a year to visit a temple or attend a family celebration. Whereas Mohan does refer frequently to ‘Madurai’, it is almost always to emphasise the importance of links with ‘people from Madurai’ to his current life in Tiruppur. These links are, firstly, those of caste, as he often tells me that he has loads of *sondukarar* (relatives, but here in the broader sense of caste members) living in Tiruppur. And, secondly, those of common area of origin, which includes a wide range of people originating from a range of villages in Madurai district from which also his parents and in-laws come. With those people Mohan continues to foster close relationships, based on shared experiences of migration and of work in the garment sector. Both types of links are vital in terms of the support they currently generate for Mohan in Tiruppur. In almost every conversation Mohan mentions that he has ‘lots of “support” in Tiruppur’, and he often compares himself with others in terms of the amounts of support they enjoy. While initially I did not understand this concept of ‘support’, for which Mohan systematically uses the English term, it gradually transpired that it has at least two meanings: support for his personal family situation and his ability to do well in life and support in his role as a tailor and contractor in the industry.

In 2005, Mohan got married to Shanti, a young woman from Madurai whose parents settled in Tiruppur more than 20 years ago. Before marriage Shanti worked as a tailor too, but since the birth of their daughter and later a son, she stayed at home. They live in a one-room rented house in the street next door to Mohan’s parents for which they pay Rs 1,350 per month. Mohan sees his father-in-law as a crucial source of support, and, to some extent, with good reason. At the time of their wedding Mohan received 12 sovereigns of gold for his wife and 2 sovereigns of gold for himself from his in-

laws, and in addition Rs 10,000 in cash. ‘I would not have had this support’, he often pointed out to me, ‘if I had gone for a love marriage!’ These and other wedding gifts enabled Mohan to buy a motorbike and start as a labour contractor around the time of his wedding. Today, Mohan keeps mentioning a big real estate deal that his father-in-law is about to strike, and he remains hopeful that some of that money might flow to him and provide starting capital for a business. Mohan therefore maintains excellent relationships with his in-laws, manifested in regular visits to them to pay due respect, and, of course, to enquire about ‘the deal’. ‘My wife’s sister’, Mohan is keen to contrast, ‘had a love marriage, so they don’t get any support at all from my father-in-law!’ This is one type of support that is crucial to Mohan in Tiruppur. While this family support might not be as robust as that which Senthil enjoys as a ‘local’, it certainly sets him apart from recent migrants many of whom lack family support in town.

Mohan is always keen to mention how well he can earn both as a tailor and as a contractor even though it requires hard work and long hours. As a skilled tailor, and with the help of his father and brothers, Mohan managed to establish himself as a contractor around the time of his wedding in 2005 and did very well for a couple of years. He worked with about 20 tailors, took regular contracts in one firm, and earned on average Rs 10,000 per week, which allowed him to settle Rs 70,000 of loans in a very short time span. But then the company where he took contracts went bust and Mohan stopped working as a contractor: ‘I made good money at that time but there was a lot of tension ... as a contractor one can never rest. I didn’t want that tension anymore, and then time was not good for me either, so I began to work as a tailor again.’ By the time I met Mohan in late 2008 Mohan worked as a tailor in Modern Fashions where he had joined the singer tailor team.

Mohan always works for piece rates and mentioned in one of our very first conversations: ‘I can earn well in this job, we earn a minimum of Rs 350-400 per day as singer tailors, but we can make even Rs 1000 per day. I earned Rs 3000 last week, and I can easily make Rs 12,000 per month, and sometimes even Rs 20,000!’ Despite the good money one can earn, piece-rates are not without their flaws. In fact, in January 2009 Mohan left his contractor in Modern Fashions following an argument over rates. Disagreements, he explained, typically arise about piece rates between

tailors and contractors: ‘We got low rates from the contractor. If I ask Rs 3.50 per piece and the contractor is only willing to give me Rs 3, then I will simply walk out and tell him to get someone else. And I’ll go and find work with another contractor. If things work out, we can stay with the same contractor and in the same company for years on end and do well...’.

But in January 2009 things didn’t work out between Mohan and his contractor. Mohan left Modern Fashions to start as a contractor in a nearby unit. Only two months later, however, Mohan was back at Modern Fashions, but now as singer contractor with his own team, rather than as tailor. The previous singer contractor had left following a dispute over piece rates - this time a dispute between contractor and company owner. During his time as a contractor in Modern Fashions, Mohan led a small team of 6-7 tailors and earned a fairly regular income even though it rarely exceeded Rs 3000 per week. Five months later, in August 2009, however, he had become seriously dissatisfied with the low rates he received from the owner, with the low quantity of work, and with the repeated delays in payments, which in turn made it hard for him to pay his own team. He left the company and took his team to another firm where he took a new contract for a two-week period. After that, he told me, ‘I left the contract, it wasn’t worth the trouble, and I joined again as a tailor in another company.’ When I met up with him in October 2009, Mohan was beaming again, telling me that the rates he was now receiving were excellent: ‘I now get Rs 8.50 per piece and I can do 150 pieces per day!’ I made a quick calculation and realised he now could make Rs 1275 per day. The following Saturday evening Mohan called to tell me proudly that he had made Rs 5600 that week: ‘You see, there as a contractor I got Rs 3000 for 6 days of work, and here I have earned Rs 5600 as a tailor for only four and a half days of work!’ Once again Mohan was proud of the money he was making as a tailor, without having the ‘headaches’ of being a contractor. As is typical of tailors in the export industry, Mohan not only keeps moving between companies and contractors - a few days in one unit may be followed by a few months in another – but he also keeps shifting between being employed as a tailor and working as a contractor and labour recruiter.

However, even though it clearly remains Mohan’s dream to become a more settled contractor – much like Senthil - he has not yet managed to achieve this. While he

does enjoy a great deal of support in town and carefully fosters his social networks of tailors, so far Mohan has failed to transform this social capital into lasting entrepreneurial success. But he doesn't give up easily. By May 2010, Mohan was working as a contractor again and seemed to be doing well. Despite the ups and downs, his aspiration to start a company remains strong and Mohan is confident that this ambition remains within reach. Following the example of better-off Tiruppurians, he also hopes to invest in land one day. Not in Tiruppur, however, where property prices are well beyond his reach, but back in Madurai where underemployed relatives could look after the land. With his present and future firmly rooted in Tiruppur, there is little chance that Mohan would ever return to the village himself. In the meanwhile, he saves in life insurance policies and sends his daughter to a local private school. 'The government school is for low people only', he says, 'we can afford it, so we send them to a matriculation school!'

Mohan's employment history illustrates a common pathway of ambitious and skilled garment workers keen to establish themselves as contractors and hopeful to set up a production unit of their own one day. While many, like Mohan, avail of the skill, knowledge and dedication required to operate as successful contractors, irregular work flows, low rates and a volatile workforce (see below) produce regular setbacks that undermine their ambitions and relegate them to the workforce.

Murugan, recent migrant and failed contractor

Let me introduce a third contractor. It was just after Diwali, October 2009, when I met Murugan (33) in his home village of Keelapatti in southern Tamil Nadu, 15 km from Madurai city. Murugan is a return migrant who, having lived and worked in Tiruppur for 5 years, came back to the village about a year earlier. At the age of 10, Murugan learned tailoring in a workshop in Madurai and by 1993, the year in which he got married, he worked as a fully skilled singer tailor. As business went down and ever more people from his area left for Tiruppur, Murugan too decided to give it a try and in 2003 he left for Tiruppur even though he had no direct contacts to support him in town. On arrival, he took on a printing job, for which he earned just Rs 45 per shift. After three months, he found more suitable work in a tailoring shop and at that point his wife and two sons joined him in Tiruppur. A few months later, on

recommendation of some people he had come to know, Murugan started to work as a singer tailor in an export garment company. 'Then', he says, 'I earned Rs 300 per day, and between Rs 1500-2000 per week!' His wife too took up work from home and earned Rs 20 per day for sorting waste cloth.

For several years they fared well in Tiruppur. Murugan claims that at some point he earned Rs 6,000 per week as a tailor: 'That's how I managed to save Rs 45,000 in just two years' time! I also had a motorbike and bought things for the house, like a mixer, etc.' As clearly a very hard working and skilled tailor, Murugan had all the knowledge needed to start as a contractor. It was again following the suggestion of a 'known person' that he finally started as a contractor and recruited tailors to work for him. But it was at this point that things took a bad turn. Murugan had agreed with the company owner to produce 50,000 pieces for a set rate, but when he completed the contract and went to collect the money, the owner only paid him Rs 8.25 per piece instead of the promised Rs 12.50. 'I made a big loss', Murugan explained, 'I had agreed good rates with the owner but not signed any contract. But I still had to pay my tailors. They fought with me for the money and pulled my shirt, so I had to use all my own savings to pay them. That's how I lost my Rs 45,000 of savings!' With the benefit of hindsight, Murugan acknowledges that his position in Tiruppur was not strong enough to start as a contractor, and that his networks were too frail. He only blames himself when reflecting back on what happened: 'I went there as a worker ... I didn't know the business ... a guy pushed me to take a contract but I didn't know enough about it, so I made a big loss ...'.

Today Murugan is back home, struggling with an overwhelming sense of shame:

Here, everyone thinks I made a lot of money in Tiruppur, but I had to come back without any money ... I don't tell anyone, only our family knows. My wife told her family and they say 'he has come back without earning anything', but they don't know about the bad luck I had and how I struggled ... When I did well, my wife's family came to stay with us in Tiruppur and they ate meat in our house. And I used to buy them clothes and give them money when they left. But today they are not appreciating this, all they say is 'he is not earning anything now' ...

On returning to Keelapatti, Murugan sat for months at home replaying in his mind what had gone wrong and worrying about the shame he had brought upon himself and his family by coming back empty-handed from a place where money is supposed to flow freely. His sense of failure and worthlessness is heightened by his family's assumptions about him squandering money and his wife's continued wrath about the whole experience. She herself now has to do agricultural work to look after him and to provide for the family - the ultimate humiliation for a man in Tamil society. Murugan went back to work as a tailor in Madurai but a friend is already calling him back to Tiruppur where he can easily earn double the Rs 150 per day he currently earns. However, Murugan is not sure he is ready for it yet and says that in the end it will depend on what his wife allows him to do.

Murugan's experience is not unique and many more stories of loss and failure could be recounted here. His story illustrates the precarious position of the contractor in Tiruppur, wedged in between company owners and workers in the garment labour hierarchy, and exposed to exploitation and deception from both sides. Contractors' resilience and their ability to cope with losses and misfortunes are ultimately conditioned by several factors, of which the quality of their social networks, the extent of 'support' they enjoy, and their migration histories to Tiruppur are key. Murugan's contacts were insufficiently reliable to build a career as contractor and he lacked the insight into the industry needed to do well as an independent contractor. Whilst there are also locals who fail and recent migrants who are successful as contractors, there is certainly a significant difference between the quality, breadth and intensity of informal support networks enjoyed by locals and long-term settled migrants, like Senthil and Mohan, on the one hand and the networks that recent migrants like Murugan draw upon. These networks not only involve good relationships with fellow workers but also knowledge of and familiarity with different company owners whose fate directly impacts on the contractors they employ. Clearly, garments workers' social capital is critical to their trajectory in Tiruppur and to a contractor's ability to sustain himself when faced with the risks of volatile labour markets.

Recruiting a team, generating flexibility and producing entrepreneurship

One of the core tasks of the contractor is to recruit an appropriately skilled, reliable and adequate team of tailors or cutting masters with whom to produce the garments according to buyers' specifications. Recruiting a team requires a good amount of social skills and a social network that is as wide as possible, and being able to recruit flexibly is one of the contractor's core entrepreneurial skills. In an export industry where styles of garments, size of orders and skill requirements change on an almost daily basis, a contractor may need 5 tailors on a Monday, 7 on a Tuesday and 3 for the rest of the week. An order of 3,000 T-shirts, which takes a team of 6 tailors three days to complete, might be followed by an order of 10,000 pyjamas that takes 12 tailors two weeks to produce. As the work flow is constantly fluctuating and largely unpredictable, most teams are made up of a small number of core tailors - whom the contractor employs on a more or less continuous basis – and a group of additional tailors who are recruited *ad hoc*.

Who, then, are the core members of such teams? Usually they are kin, people who migrated from the same region, or long-term friends whom the contractor has known and usually worked with for a long time. Senthil's regular team, for example, consisted of himself (he always stitches alongside his team members), his father (who mainly co-ordinates the work but sometimes also stitches himself), three tailors (Raja, Suresh and Rajkumar) and three helpers (Anand, Jeejee and Kamatchi Amma). Raja and Suresh are close friends from Tirunelveli district in southern Tamil Nadu, who befriended Senthil, the contractor, when they worked alongside him in a previous company and they have now been working for him since he started as a contractor about 4 years back. The company is the primary site where tailors get to know each other, and where future contractors can assess the skill and work attitude of their co-workers and cultivate friendships with those workmates whom they might later recruit on their own team. Senthil often praises Suresh and Raja in public for being very good friends, excellent tailors and reliable team members. 'They won't leave me just like that!', Senthil reassures me. It was not until late into the fieldwork and when I had come to know Senthil much better that I asked him about Raja and Suresh's caste. Senthil told me they are both SC¹, from the Paraiyar community, but immediately emphasised that caste doesn't matter in the industry and that he would never ask

¹ SC stands for Scheduled Caste, which is the generic administrative name for Dalit communities.

someone's caste on recruitment. Indeed, all a recruiter needs to know is whether the tailors are skilled, able to produce at the required speed and to set quality standards. And this skill, Senthil explained, is something he can spot within hours of seeing a tailor at the machine. It is true that caste is never talked about within the company or among workers, and I felt very uncomfortable raising it at all. On another occasion, Suresh and Raja themselves told me that caste doesn't matter and that contractors never ask their caste when they consider them for employment. While constant joking and teasing shapes the everyday interactions on the shop floor, caste is never the point of reference nor the goal of such exchanges.

Rajkumar, the other core tailor on Senthil's team, is a young man of 26 from Trichy who belongs to the Thevar community (agriculturalists). After the death of his father, his mother and grandmother moved to Tiruppur to make a living and on completing 12th standard, Rajkumar started to work as a helper and became a skilled powerable tailor three years later. He too befriended Senthil, Raja and Suresh at work and has been working for Senthil for 4 years. Jeejee, a core helper, is a woman in her forties from Kerala who lives just next to the company. As her husband works in a teashop and her adult son joined the police force in Kerala, she is relatively free and flexible to work long hours, and is always the first person to be called upon when checking or helper work is available in the company. Kamatchi Amma commutes daily from a place 15 km outside Tiruppur to work as a checking lady in the company. She is only in her late 30s but feels she is too old to learn tailoring. Her husband is a handloom weaver in the village, while Kamatchi Amma has been commuting to Tiruppur for the last 5 years, since her daughter started school – she is never asked by the contractor to work later than 8.30pm. Anand, finally, is a local Gounder of 21 who commutes to Tiruppur from a nearby village, where his parents are agriculturalists. Not keen on working the land, like many Gounders of his generation, he came to work in town as a *kaimadi* and has been employed by Senthil for the last couple of years. Whereas in the village his father, as a Gounder landowner, employs Dalits to work his land, in Tiruppur Anand is employed as a low-paid helper to assist high-earning Dalit tailors.

These core members of Senthil's team are employed on a more or less regular basis, which means that whenever a new order arrives, they are the first to be offered work. However, given the constant fluctuations in the size of orders and in the deadlines to

which they have to be produced, Senthil often needs to employ extra hands. In such cases, he usually calls on his wife, who as an experienced powerable tailor can work as fast as any of the regular male workers, or on Saravanan, a highly-skilled local tailor and friend, who tends to work as a part-time tailor and part-time painter. He is usually willing to help out on an *ad hoc* basis but seems less reliable as a regular recruit. If an extra helper or checker is needed, Senthil brings in his mother too. Kin members are crucial to Senthil, whose team often includes his father, wife and mother. Friendships and former work relationships are the other main networks through which Senthil recruits tailors, and as a 'local' who went to school in Tiruppur and who worked in the industry from a young age onwards, his networks and those of his relatives are extensive. Senthil often tells me that finding tailors is not a problem for him as he knows hundreds of people in town.

How, then, does Mohan go about recruiting singer tailors? Unlike powerable tailors, singer tailors do not require helpers, so Mohan only needs to find skilled tailors to start the job. While at Modern Fashions, Mohan's core team members always included himself, his older brother Palaniveel, his cousin Inbaraj, and a good friend, Ramakrishnan. Palaniveel is always the first one whom Mohan calls on and he often assists Mohan in his role as contractor. Inbaraj, his younger cousin, left Madurai after falling out with his family following his love marriage to a Muslim girl. In Tiruppur he was taken under the wings of Mohan's father who taught him singer tailoring, and now, at the age of 24, Inbaraj is a skilled singer tailor regularly employed by Mohan. As cousins, they have a very good understanding, and a close, casual relationship. Ramakrishnan, the last core member of Mohan's team, ran away from his home village in the southern district of Theni at the age of 13, slowly worked his way into garment tailoring, and now aged 26, Ramakrishnan is an experienced singer tailor. He befriended Mohan in town and even though they come from different districts in the South and belong to different castes (Ramakrishnan is a Naicker), their similar migratory experiences and shared experiences on the garment shop floor have turned Mohan and Ramakrishnan into close friends.

When Mohan needs additional tailors, he calls on his younger sister, Selvi, who is usually given basic stitching work, but comes in very handy as she can always be flexibly called upon. Similarly, Mohan also employs his younger brother, Murthy,

and his sister's husband, if he requires more tailors. While the latter are both well trained singer tailors, they tend to work on a more regular basis for other contractors and are therefore not always as readily available. That is why Mohan also maintains good relationships with a wider group of friends, which includes more distant relatives and caste fellows, men who migrated like himself from the Madurai area, and friends made in Tiruppur itself. On countless occasions, Mohan took me to different companies to introduce me to friends whom he had worked with or for in the past, or who had worked for him as a contractor.

Much of the industry's flexibility lies in the contractors' hands. Their ability to recruit flexibly crucially depends on their ability to maintain good relationships with a large pool of workers whom they can call upon as and when needed. It is obviously easier to retain the loyalty of workers when one can offer them regular employment; it is much harder to kindle their commitment if work is only intermittently available. Getting the workers' commitment not only helps contractors in avoiding a high labour turnover, it also comes in handy when they need their team members to work 16 and even 20 hour shifts to meet a shipping deadline. Contractors therefore invest a lot in building friendships with their team members and in making tailors well-disposed towards them. Senthil and Mohan buy tea for their teams each morning and afternoon, sometimes with snacks added. While a normal shift runs from 8.30am till 8.30pm, the contractor will provide supper (or money for supper) in case his team works till midnight, and more tea in case they carry on till 5am the next morning. Whenever there is no work, Senthil takes his core team members for a film and pays for the tickets, cool drinks and cigarettes. To celebrate his daughter's eight birthday, Senthil invited all members of his team over to his house where his wife had prepared an elaborate chicken briyani meal. 'I am not inviting family', Senthil explained, 'only friends; I am closest to them!'

Even when work relationships break down, contractors and their team members usually try hard to retain good relationships. When in January 2009 Mohan left the contractor for whom he worked (following a disagreement about piece-rates), his departure did not result in any major ill-feelings between them. A few weeks later I found Mohan talking to the contractor again and enquiring about how things were going with the latest order. It would have been entirely acceptable for Mohan to join

the team again at a later stage, perhaps if the piece-rates had improved or if he failed to get work elsewhere. What is clear, though, is that tailors and contractors alike cannot easily afford to fall out, as they know they may need each other again in future. Both workers and contractors, and especially those among them who have a long-term commitment to garment work, try hard to settle disagreements as amicably as possible and avoid open disputes. They are well aware of what is at stake: their name as a tailor or contractor within their social networks and, thus, the very basis of job security and employability within the industry.

Given the constant mobility of workers in and out of companies and teams, holding on to a core team of tailors, ironers or cutting masters is not a minor achievement. In fact it forms the main challenge for any contractor and contributes to what Mohan calls the constant ‘tension’ and ‘headache’ of managing a team. Well-qualified and hard-working garment workers have plenty of opportunities within the industry. Within a booming labour market that is perennially short of skilled labour, experienced workers have a lot of leverage over contractors and employers, and they know it. Whenever they are unhappy with their current conditions, they simply move on to the next-door company or contractor. The precariousness of the relationship is well illustrated by what happened to Senthil in 2009. Despite Senthil’s relentless efforts at maintaining the best possible relationships with his core team members, Raja, Suresh, and Rajkumar unexpectedly walked out on him at the end of May 2009, leaving him without any of his core tailors. Even though the helpers and checkers stayed with him, Senthil exclaimed:

‘Our team has left!’

I asked: ‘Why did they leave so suddenly?’

Senthil said: ‘They said they wanted more freedom, so they left for another company.’

I inquired: ‘But they had lots of freedom here, didn’t they? Is that really the reason why they left?’

Senthil admitted: ‘They didn’t like my father ... he is too dominant, too strict, so they left...’

Whatever the reason they left, there is no doubt that the relationship had somehow broken down and that Senthil’s attempts to create a reliable team had failed. While

Senthil tries hard to establish close friendships with his team members, his father takes the role of the disciplinarian on the shop floor. He spurs on the tailors to work a little faster when production slows down, tells them off when they make mistakes, and generally keeps track of what happens on the shop floor. Self-conscious as they are of their own ability, and highly independent as workers, few tailors tolerate being told off or bossed around. If they feel restricted in their freedoms or, as was probably the case here, disciplined too strictly, it does not take long before they leave to another company. Senthil struggled with their sudden departure and felt seriously let down, partly of course because he trusted them, but partly also because it exposed his own vulnerability as a contractor. What is interesting, however, is that all three of them keep in touch by phone. ‘They call me every week’, Senthil reassured me, ‘but they won’t come here ... they are avoiding my father!’ Indeed, neither side can afford to completely fall out, as one day, perhaps even in the near future, they may need each other again.

Payment is another pressure point for contractors. While payments take place on Saturday evenings, contractors routinely advance money to their tailors during the week, which is then deducted from their pay on Saturday. Such advances help to create goodwill among the tailors and generate the mutual trust that underpins the relationship. However, weekly payments can also be used by the contractor as a tool to force team members to turn up for work. If the work is unfinished on Saturday evening, the contractor will not pay the team members till the Sunday evening so as to ensure that they turn up for work on Sunday morning. But payments are also crucial in a different way. Contractors who fail to pay their team members on a regular basis or who keep delaying payments are at immediate risk of losing workers’ loyalty. Given that there are always contractors in search of an extra tailor or cutting master, the latter will simply move on to another employer when a contractor fails to pay at the end of the week. Contractors’ inability to fulfil this basic duty toward their team members can quickly earn them a bad reputation and jeopardise their future as a contractor. It can also have immediate repercussions such as team members leaving a contractor *en masse* or threatening him with verbal and physical abuse. This is precisely why Murugan (above) ended up using his own Rs 45,000 savings to pay his workers when the company owner let him down, and why Mohan gave up as a contractor at Modern Fashions in August 2009 when repeated delays in payment from

the company owner made it increasingly difficult for him to keep paying his tailors at the end of the week. Contractors can easily get trapped between company owners who delay payments to them and workers who demand payment on the spot. Few contractors have much working capital themselves and most rely on the cash that is passed down to them by company owners. The skill for contractors is to identify reliable and trustworthy companies whose owners are known to pay them on time, and who won't put contractors' relationship with workers at risk.

Commanding authority on the shop floor

While much of the contractor's name and reputation is shaped by the nature of his interactions with his team members, much of his authority is produced on the shop floor itself. Here, the contractor is key to the production process: his collaboration can lead to the timely delivery of a product while any obstruction from his side can delay and even ruin a complete order. It is crucial therefore to understand his interactions with company management, workers, supervisors and quality controllers. What follows are some scenes from the shop floor that illustrate the sources of contractors' authority and the vulnerabilities to which they are exposed.

In most companies, owners and managers are more than happy to let the contractor organise production as he sees fit. It is unthinkable that a company owner would intervene in the division of labour between tailors, decide on the number of tailors needed, or negotiate modes of payment (piece-rate or shift-rate). These are the exclusive domains of the contractor. At Modern Fashions, the owner rarely enters the shop floor or interacts with the workers directly. When he wants to discuss a problem with an ongoing order or talk about a new contract, he always calls the contractor to his office, where they negotiate deadlines, rates, and quality issues. Most company owners treat their contractors with a great amount of respect as they realise that their order is in the contractors' hands. Many owners feel that the contractors are almost too powerful and that they have become overly dependent on them. One employer told me: 'the contractors are the real bosses (*mudalali*) here; if we don't talk nicely to them or give them respect, they will just walk out!' Much of the contractor's authority does indeed evolve from their crucial role within production, and especially their ability to manage labour and guarantee a smooth production process. The crucial

point being that a minor delay or a fault in production might lead to the rejection of an entire order. Needless to say this also means that a lot of responsibility and thus risk is devolved to them.

When it comes to the negotiation of rates, exchanges between company owners and contractors often become quite tense. When the owner gives the contractor a sample of an upcoming order, for example a children's T-shirt, the latter will take it away to calculate what it will cost him (in terms of labour cost) to stitch that T-shirt. He will then get back to the owner and ask for a specific rate. The company owner then usually makes a lower counter offer and – after more going back and forth - a final rate settlement is agreed. If a contractor is unhappy with the rate offered by the company or simply feels that it is inadequate to produce the order with a reasonable margin for himself, there are several possible scenarios. Firstly, he may keep negotiating to get a better rate, especially if he suspects that the owner himself is getting a good deal out of the order. Secondly, he might just accept the rate and compromise in the hope that he will get a better rate for the next order. Thirdly, he might just walk out and start elsewhere. Contractors rarely take rash decisions in these matters and balance different factors, including the overall nature of their working relationship with the company owner, the rates they got in the past, and the likelihood of getting regular and better payments in the future. Contractors and employers alike admit that this is an area of constant negotiation, dispute and compromise. While company owners obviously try to push the rates down as much as they can, they too make a careful trade-off between their own profit-margins, their relationship with the specific contractor, and their overall reputation as an employer. If they squeeze a contractor too hard, employers risk not only losing the contractor and his entire team, but spoiling their name and thus their ability to recruit work teams in future. Employers know what makes a good contractor, and they try hard to hang on to him when they have got one. At Modern Fashions, for example, Senthil has been working as a powerable contractor for over two years and his relationship with the company owner has been good throughout. But the story of singer contractors is different. Even during the year that I observed the company, there were several disputes between the singer contractors and the owner, resulting in contractors repeatedly walking out on the company owner. This reflects singer tailors' overall

privileged position as the most skilled tailors in the industry and the leverage this gives them in negotiations with employers.

Tensions also rise on the shop floor when an order goes wrong and a set of garments needs to be re-stitched or, in the worst case, rejected. Contractors, because of their technical knowledge, skill and experience, are usually well-prepared to defend their case vis-à-vis employers or quality controllers, and well-versed in passing on responsibility to others. Negotiation skills are crucial to their survival as contractors. What follows illustrates how contractors' intimate knowledge of the production process forms the basis of their authority on the shop floor and enables them to ward off blame and responsibility when problems arise.

18/03/2009: I am working alongside the tailors at Modern Fashions and in the course of the morning we get a visit from a QC (quality controller) sent by the company that has subcontracted this order to us. Quality controllers routinely enter the workshop to carry out in-production quality checks. The QC measures the length and width of a few T-shirts and tells Senthil, the contractor, that they are 2cm longer than the specification. Senthil tells him to check 5 more pieces and then see. As soon as a mistake is identified tensions rise and tailors and contractors become nervous about what went wrong and who is to blame. But Senthil remains calm and confident. The QC checks more T-shirts and confirms that several of them are too long. Suresh and Rajkumar join Senthil around the QC, and begin to discuss what might account for the error. Senthil too measures several T-shirts and then explains to the QC that because there are several tailors involved, some variation between pieces is normal and that a 1cm margin is acceptable anyway. The QC is told to measure more T-shirts. He does so and says that some are okay but that other pieces are still 1 to 2 cm too long and that a margin of 2cm is unacceptable. A discussion follows about what caused the errors, with the QC trying to blame the tailors for irregular stitching. But Senthil is fast on his feet. He immediately defends his tailors. The QC then blames the cutting masters, but again Senthil says that also the cutting had been flawless. 'Rather', he explains to the QC, 'it is the printing: we stitched the shoulder pieces and then the garments were sent to the printers. It's in the process of printing that some T-shirts have been stretched. They then came back to us and we finished off the stitching work. It has nothing to do with us! Please do and check with the printers.' The QC left and never came back on the issue. Later I ask Senthil how well the QC knows this job. Senthil explained: 'this boy is only 20 or so and knows very little about garment production'. Tailors and contractors dislike QCs for they check and comment on their work without necessarily knowing any tailoring or cutting work themselves. Yet, even though QCs are easily silenced by the contractor, they nevertheless act as a constant force to reckon with.

QCs exchanges with contractors on the shop floor are usually highly conflictual. On the one hand, as inspectors who may well spot real mistakes, they are potential trouble-makers for the tailors, while on the other hand, as young and often inexperienced men, they have to face up to the confidence and skilled knowledge of experienced contractors who always defend their teams.

Contractors and tailors' relationships with company supervisors are not free of conflict either. Most company owners stay away from the shop floor and instead appoint supervisors to follow up the day-to-day production. Supervisors are usually young, often educated, men whose task it is to follow up the order, supply tailors with raw materials, liaise with outside suppliers, and co-ordinate between teams on the shop floor. However, supervisors' authority is considerably curtailed by the dominance of contractors. Both contractors and tailors boss supervisors around and ridicule their lack of technical skill – which remains the monopoly of tailors and contractors. Tailors only take instructions from their contractor whom they consider their real employer. If a supervisor raises a problem directly with a tailor, the latter will immediately refer him to their contractor and make it clear that they only take orders from their contractor. As a result, the role of supervisor is rarely a desirable one in Tiruppur's smaller garment firms. Many supervisors are new to the town and the industry, and while they may have considerable levels of education – many have completed at least secondary schooling and often even a degree – they are usually young men with limited technical skills or knowledge of the production process. Being charged with the responsibility of ensuring a smooth production process on the shop floor, supervisors are faced with a skilled, experienced, and confident labour force under the leadership of powerful contractors. Both tailors and contractors do not hesitate to tell them off, boss them around and even ridicule them in public. This considerably undermines their authority and reduces them to little more than an odd-job man on the shop floor. It need not surprise us therefore that there is a high level of turnover among supervisors and that the more ambitious ones among them usually soon move on to more respected and rewarding jobs in the industry.

Conclusion

While there is evidence that labour contractors are central to the shaping of export industries and on the rise globally as a mode of labour recruitment within GPNs, they remain largely absent from the literature and we have only scant knowledge of who those recruiters are and how they function, especially within the informal spaces of GPNs. They not only remain invisible within national statistics and labour surveys but they also escape corporate interventions that try to contain and regulate them (Barrientos 2008; 2011). Coe and Jordhus-Lier have similarly emphasized that few studies of labour processes have paid adequate attention to labour intermediaries, while in fact they ‘play an active role in the ongoing remaking of labour markets’ (2011 *ibid.*: check). Yet despite this knowledge gap, stereotypes circulate which cast the labour contractor as unscrupulous exploiter of vulnerable labour and as rapacious profit-maker who operates at the cost of the most marginalised workers (Barrientos 2011; Picherit 2009).

Without seeking to deny that some contractors are undoubtedly exploiting weaker actors within increasingly globalized production networks, this paper has sought to discredit such wholesale representations of middlemen. Such representations not only isolate the middleman from the wider global commercial dynamics that give rise to his existence in the first place, but they also remove them from the social processes that shape their rise and fall within production networks. This paper argues for the need to re-embed the labour intermediary within their wider social life world, including their employment histories, personal qualities and future aspirations (Castree 2007: 859). Such an approach reveals that labour contractors are central to the shaping of local labour control regimes and that they play a key role in the production of the flexibility and entrepreneurship that industrial clusters need to survive and compete within GPNs. Viewed from the informal networks and social relationships in which they are embedded in Tiruppur, labour contractors also emerge as remarkably vulnerable actors whose own migration trajectories and personal histories often curtail their ability to establish themselves more firmly within the industry. Moreover, their highly precarious position in-between company owners and skilled labour force reminds them of the constant need to tread carefully and to negotiate risks, responsibilities and personalities with great skill. Some do very well and may even end up as small company owners themselves. The majority are happy if they can make a regular living from it and maintain their good name in Tiruppur,

much like Senthil. Many, like Mohan, however, struggle to establish themselves as a regular contractor and keep crossing the boundary between worker and contractor, often unable to find rewarding contracts or retain a reliable workforce. Others, finally, end up tipping the balance of risk, lose all they have, and are forced to migrate back home, empty-handed and with a great deal of shame and disappointment, like Murugan.

Indeed, Murugan's story is a far cry from the image of unscrupulous exploiter or wicked rentier, and calls for more ethnographically informed research on middlemen and labour intermediaries that reveal their entrepreneurship, skill and capabilities while reminding us of the shaky ground they stand on and the informal contexts that frame their actions. Indeed, informality, Cross reminds us (2011), is anything but exceptional - even within the special export zones and global production networks that frame contractors' work environments. Corporate interventions in this informal sphere would benefit from mobilizing this entrepreneurial activity rather than merely restricting it by imposing regulatory regimes and corporate codes that risk curtailing its potential for many workers in the Global South.

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