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“Gendered cities; identities, activities, networks – a life course approach”

**Seminar of the Commission on Gender and Geography of the
International Geographical Union**

Rome, The Home of Geography Villa Celimontana, May 30-31 2003

*Industrial activities, circular mobilities and new gender identity;
the example of a small industrialised city in South India*

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Abstract

In India, the decade of 1990s will be marked by its integration into a globalised economy as a result of its policy of liberalisation. By favouring the development of export industries and of delocalisation, liberalisation has enabled the growth of women's employment in most of the countries of the South, particularly in India and in our case in small cities of an industrial cluster in Tamil Nadu. In traditional areas where some husbands do not fulfil their responsibilities as head of family, women look upon their employers as their benefactors as they provide the women the possibility of earning even though their salaries might be ridiculously low. Our study shows that the factory has enabled many women to step out of their domestic space, increased their mobility and their new use of urban space, either to go to work or to visit relatives, helped them to be less dependant on the in-laws by an involvement in the decisions taken about the way in which income are to be used and thus earning respect in society. These new activities provide the women an opportunity to express their desire to create a forum for speech collective action, and new identity and thus to establish their autonomy and scope for negotiation and empowerment.

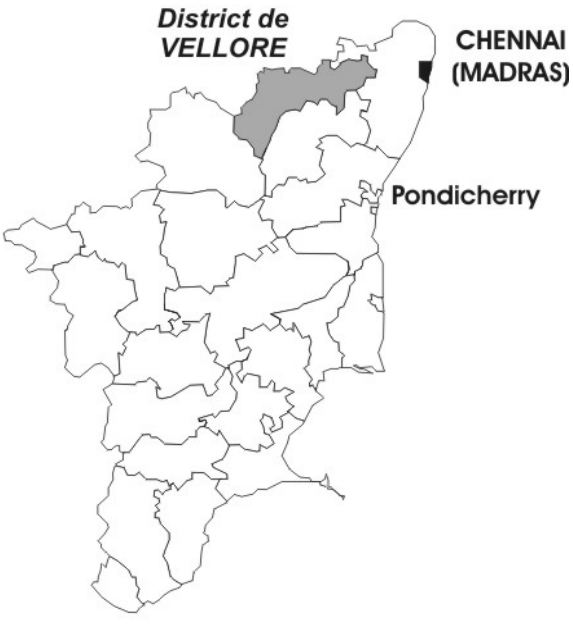
Context of the study

In India, the development of export industries during the 1990s has enabled the growth of women's employment in most of the countries of the South, particularly in India and in our case in Vellore district (fig.1). The example of a leather industrial cluster in rural Tamil Nadu fully brings out this phenomenon. This industrial cluster is the main producer of leather products in India. Shoe factories and tanneries have created job opportunities for women who constitute the unskilled labour in this sector, even though these women are much better educated than agricultural workers. The number of working Indian women is growing, the majority of such women, that is to say the poorest, work from compulsion and because they never had any choice, and for salaries which are distinctly lower than those of men (except in public service).

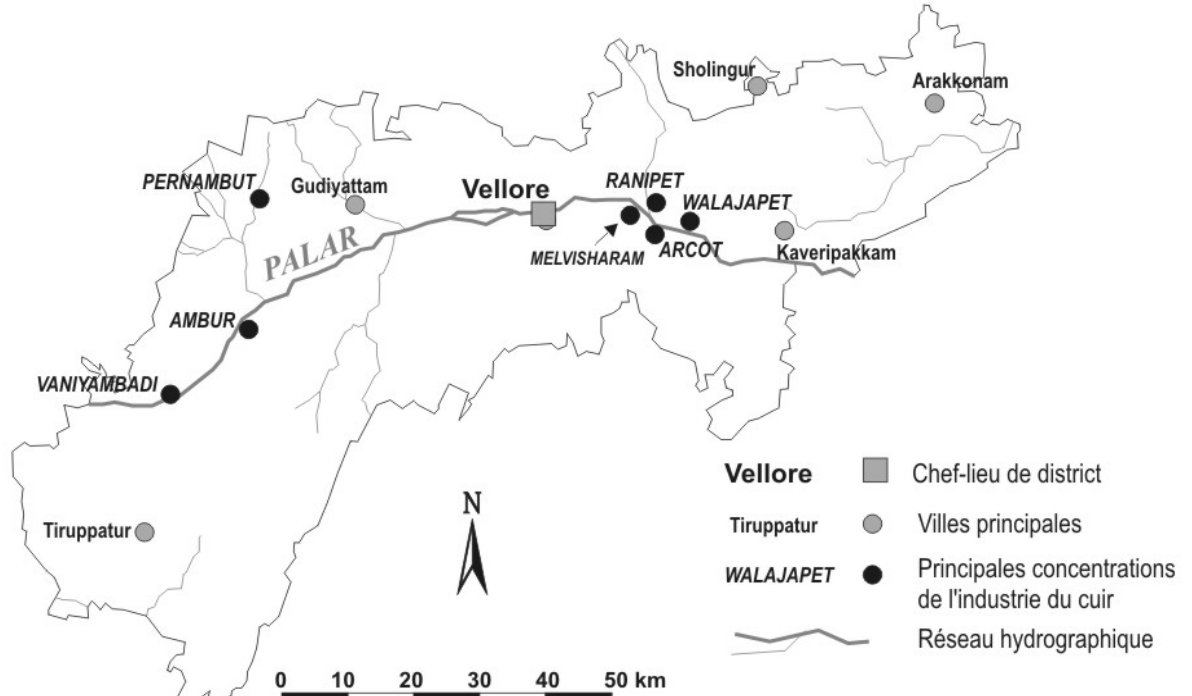
**L'Etat du TAMIL NADU
en Inde**



**Le district de VELLORE
dans le Tamil Nadu**



**Le district de VELLORE,
Industrie du cuir dans la vallée de la PALAR**



Main questions

As a human geographer, it seems important in my opinion to use the new theoretical approaches on gender issues and apply them to analyse mobilities. Until now, Social and spatial Mobilities are male biased. The invisibility of the women in the studies concerning mobilities is obvious. Male mobility versus settled female. Talking about mobilities implies many forms of movement : mobility is spatial and social or vertical and horizontal. Mobility must be analysed as a process. In India except the female migration of marriage, the female work mobilities are not studied. So my study is focussed on the different forms of female work mobilities : spatial, intersectorial, professional and social. To understand fully the implications of industrialisation for women, we would also need to examine the impact of women's earnings on intrahousehold income and decision making. In other words, we would need to analyse whether a wage empowers women within the household and increases their autonomy. In the view of Amartya Sen (2000), salaried employment of women increases their power to negotiate their position and power both at home and in the economy and helps towards their social emancipation.

Methodology

For our study, The leather industrial cluster in Vellore district in Tamil Nadu has been chosen because we can find different types of jobs for women in agriculture and industry. Almost 80 shoe factories are located along the Palar river around Ambur and Ranipet employing almost 6000 permanent workers according to the Inspector of factories. But according to our survey, a lot of casual workers are employed, so it's difficult to know the exact number of women employed. But, today, according to the managers, we can say that more than 16000 young women (<45 years) of different communities (hindu, christian and muslim) are employed in these shoe factories. So to conduct a survey concerning the different occupations of women in Palar Valley and the impact of the work on gender relations, we have decided to make some interviews, almost two hundred between Vanyambadi and Ranipet. During these interviews, we get on topics concerning socio-economic characteristics, religion, cast, level of education, migratory steps, professional biography and most of all, the mobilities of the women (activities outside the house during one day, one week...) and the relationship with husband and family and problems (poverty, ill-treatment, beating, alcoholism...). We stayed almost one or two hours with each person. During our second

survey, we have decided to focus my research around Ranipet, which is an important industrial zone in Palar valley. This city of almost 70 000 inhabitant belongs to an industrial zone who covers also Walajapet and Arcot. To understand the circular mobilities and the activities of the women and their condition, we interviewed some managers about the social advantages (maternal holidays, holidays canteen...), the wages for male and female, overtime...We are not very confident about their answers, and it is difficult to have any confirmation because the unions are forbidden. But we have to know that a minimum salary doesn't exist and because of these conditions, there is a big turnover amongst the workers. To have an idea about the residence of these women, we met the manager of the ESI (Insurance of the workers) who gets all the details about the residence of these women workers, because the managers of the factories have to declare their workers to the Insurance. But the ESI only knows the residence of the permanent workers and we must bare in mind that there is a casualisation of the labour in this formal sector. Anyway, it helps us to identify the villages and the areas of the cities representative of the industrialised labour.

Flexibility of labour market and emergence of salaried class of women industrial workers

Globalisation, which has helped in the growth of export oriented manufacturing industries, has given the impetus to the emergence of salaried class of women industrial workers not only in urban areas but in rural areas as well. In the context of globalisation and international competitiveness, employers prefer locating their factories in small cities in order to optimise the cost of production and to benefit from economies of scale. At this time of global capital market, it is imperative for all employers to have cheap and flexible labour of internationally comparable quality in order to maintain and increase the competitive advantage at the international scale.

For example, in Palar valley, many shoe factories have closed not only, because of the campaign against the killing of the cows, but also because the competition is very hard, considering the fact that the women labour is cheaper in China, Bangladesh and Pakistan as we have been said by the 15 managers we met recently. And it is well known that hundreds tanneries have closed since 1998 because of the pollution. But now, the chairman of the KH group of companies in Ranipet (Hashim) said that the leather industry has invested Rs 150 crores in the last 8 years on the installation of common effluent treatment plants of which only 20 crores were given as subsidy by government. Concerning the problem of cow slaughter,

the industrialist is very upset because 90% of the leather came from goats, sheep and buffaloes¹. Anyway, it remains a big political issue.

The processes of rendering industrial production more flexible and of globalisation have not had the same effect on women as on men. Though this flexibility is the reason for feminisation of jobs long dominated by men, several studies have also shown that women are paid less than men, under take new types of employment (part time, temporary, domiciliary, unit rate ...) and cannot claim promotion in jobs which make their jobs insecure. Women, whose labour costs less, are much sort after by employers, even more in rural than in urban areas as we can see in Palar valley. It has been observed that female labour is cheap not only because of difference between the wages of men and women but also because of the lack of security and lack of protection which characterise women's labour and are both linked to the flexibility of the labour market. On the other hand women also prefer some flexibility in their work which allows them to take care of their families. Their docility is also the reason for employers preferring women labourers..

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However, the perception of the women work has changed with the industrialisation. Usually, in this traditional area, working outside the house is usually dishonour. During our first survey in 1999 concerning all types of women work in this valley, many women told us that women

¹ Hindu, 24 august 2003

couldn't work outside the house because they can't assume their traditional roles of wives, mothers or daughter in law. However the limit between domestic work and household industry (beedie roller, agabarties. weavers...) is very difficult to define. Many of the women cannot make the difference. We have to notice that Vellore district is the first district in TN where the non-agricultural work conducted mainly by women is predominant. If at the beginning of the industrialisation, the shoe factory work was not well perceived because of the risk of "love affairs", now except in the remote areas, the shoe factory is appreciated by the women workers and their families, because it represents a social mobility. For example many agricultural and non agricultural women workers are very proud to say that their daughters have never worked in the mud of the paddy field under the sun and they have only worked in shoe factories. However, it's more an intergenerational social mobility. Shoe factory is represented as a modern and prestigious place, because the conditions of work seem better (women are well dressed) out of the sun in a nice place with regular hours of work.

After this survey, we can define a profile of the women workers in Palar Valley: Most of them belonged to the age –group 15-45 years to cutting and stitching. Some of them have entered the industry as adolescent workers (Muslims) mostly as helpers. Most of the women in age group 18-25 are not married. Our survey has shown that a majority (60-70%) of women belongs to backward casts and now scheduled casts. But unlike the agricultural sector, we can find some women of medium and high casts. The majority of the workers are Hindus (60-70%), and the remaining 30% are Muslims and/or Christians. If the manager is Muslim, it's possible to have 30% Muslim workers, because of the community preference. Generally, the Muslim women are secluded because of the purdah (seclusion), but because of the extreme poverty of certain people of this community, the family send the girls (10 years for the youngest) to the shoe factories. To be politically correct the Muslim managers employ 90% of women (in one factory, I met a female human resources manager Hindu, and she had a MA history). But in other factories managed by Hindus, you can have mixed assembly line.

If at the beginning of the industrialisation (1980), no special qualification was required, now because of the increasing demand of work, managers ask for higher level of education (8-10 th standard), except for the Muslims (community preference). The Christians are generally more educated than Hindu and Muslims and they are also present in the public service. The average income of the majority of these workers is less than 1500 Rs (30 euros). They are used to working from 8 am to 6 p.m. with one hour overtime compulsory. Managers can give some different incentives if the workers work 24 days continuously or if they

produce more ... If they miss one day, they have a penalty of 100Rs (10% of the salary) ; it s a way to limit the big turnover : for one euro difference, workers can go to another factory. But for a better understanding of the employment situation, it's possible to distinguish between permanent workers (> 3 years) and casual (flexible) workers who represent a majority of workers which can be divided in 3 categories : temporary (<2 years), seasonal (3-6 months) and daily workers. Only the permanent workers can get some welfare benefits as insurance and provided fund, maternity leaves, bonus...

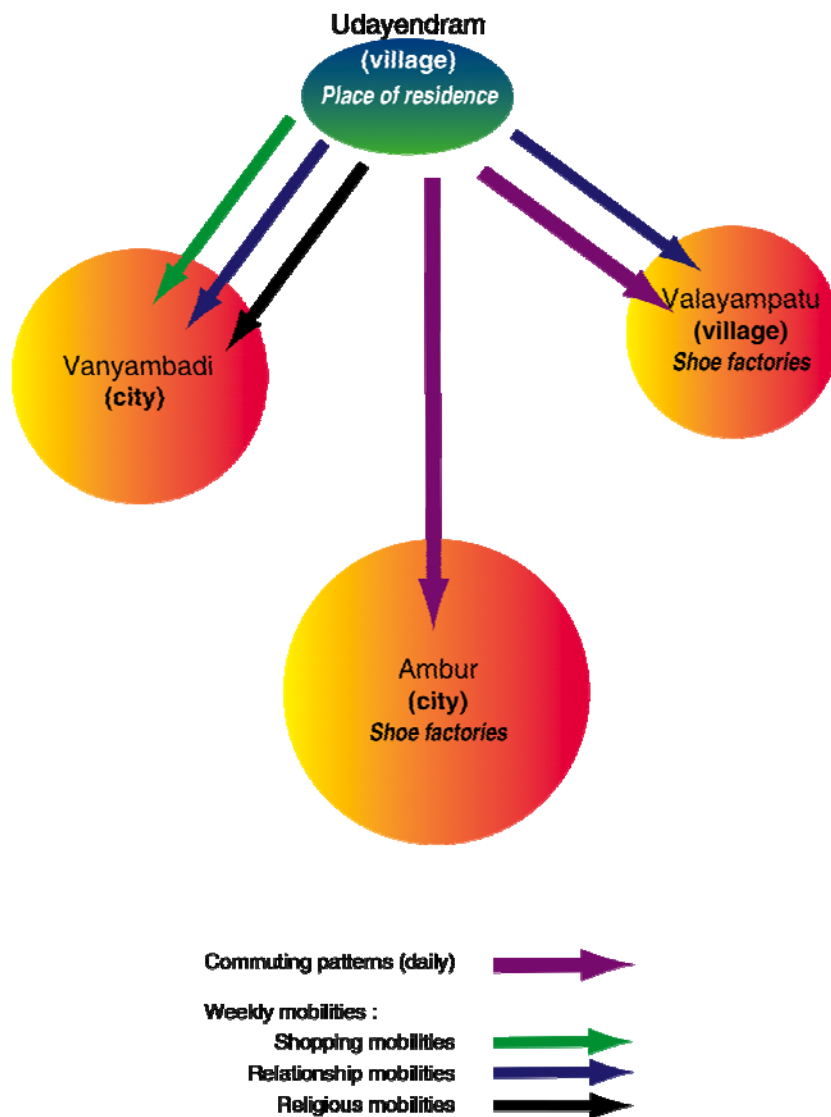
What is common in this area and elsewhere (N.Neetha,2002), is the growing casualisation of female labour in particular and the clear indication that the growing use of female labour has been associated with the greater insecurity of labour contracts and the generally inferior conditions and pay involved in employing women rather than men (T.S.Papola, 1999). The number of employment opportunities created by casualisation certainly are more, but they are also in worse conditions. This largest employment change is in the industrial subcontracting sector. Many big companies as we have seen in this valley subcontract for their production. Some of the producers give sometimes out work to home based workers through contractors. Even many medium scale industries in the organised sector subcontract work to home-based women workers. Subcontracting of work given out to home based workers seems to have expanded phenomenally over the past decade, most of all during peak seasons. In a lot of colonies surveyed in Ranipet area, a majority of households, at least one woman was reported to be doing some kind of home-based work. However this type of jobs created in this way are irregular and low paid, far below the poverty line income (500 Rs = 10 euros) and most of all on a piece rate basis.

Circular mobilities and new life spaces

During our survey, we ask women about all their spatial mobilities (frequency and nature). The main mobility concerning the commuters who can go to work eventually with the company buses. The main shoe factories send the vans to the village to pick up the workers. Those who can't get these special buses go by walk or by the public buses. So, they can spend one hour in the transport to go to work. With their triple role (work, childcare et cooking), women can begin the day at 4pm and finish at 10pm. Some of them prefer going far away to earn more, that means 1euro more. But for this shuttle, they used to go by groups of neighbours, friends, without male chaperons. It's a first time for most of these young women

to go outside without father brother, husband, ... It is a way also for them to create a female collective identity. They can discuss many topics concerning the life in the family, the love affairs...

And this commuting has impulsed some other types of movings around to market, friends. When they are coming back home, they can stop to buy some food, to make shopping, to meet some friends... Theirs life space is not restricted to the domestic space but has been broaden (fig.2).



Réalisation : Aimée Laffite (UMR ADES)

Factories are perceived as a dangerous environment for fidelity and chastity of married and unmarried women. Emergence of love affairs which could affect the endogamy rules is feared. The promiscuity in factories (except in factories whose manager is Muslim) can favour some love affairs between different casts and even different communities. Families fear this “danger” for their daughters, but the attraction of a financial enhancement overcomes the advantages these inconveniences. So, the factory is a space of new sociabilities and gender interaction where men and women of different communities and cast are mixed.

The other interesting case concerning Muslims women who are used to going to factories with the burquah in private buses and by walk, the burquah is a way for them to negotiate the public male space, with the burquah, they can deal the unwelcome attentions of the men when they are in the streets. However in the factories, they have to remove the burquah, but the place appears safe to them, because most of the workers are women. Paradoxically, this burquah can give them the right to penetrate the public male space .

Gender identity and impact of life cycles

In such rural areas, where the patriarchal ideology is very deep rooted, growth of female salaried class, even with the increased exploitation of women which it implies, maybe a factor leading to emancipation as stated by some of the women who were interrogated about their condition.

In spite of bad work conditions (low salaries, casualisation, overtime compulsory), but better than any other activity (except public services) most of the unmarried women may prefer going to the factory than doing nothing at home where they get bored and they can escape the control exercised by their family and neighbour. Women of factories used to getting married later than the other women get, because sometimes they are the only one in the family who can bring money and also it's the only way for them to prepare their dowry.

But after marriage some of the women have to give up their jobs in the factories to look after children. Some of them however manage to get work which can to be done at home, till the children grow up, but for pathetically low salaries (at unit rate) and do not get the welfare benefits (bonus or allowance, maternity leave, retirement benefit ...). This system which is highly prized by the mothers who have been interviewed, minimises in many ways the contradictions between the necessity to stay at home and look after the children and the necessity to leave the children in order to work outside. The system of employment on unit rate payment increases the exploitation of these isolated women who have no legal right to demand better working conditions and higher salaries. The social-cultural factors, marriage, child bearing, and related household responsibilities were the often-cited factors for high labour turnover. But because of poverty and to support family, many married Hindu and Christian women have to work and most of all the widows and the abandoned women.

Never the less, none of the women interviewed would, in no condition, like to give up their jobs in factories or fight for better wages, as according to them the "exploitation" in

factories is insignificant compared to that which they experience at home. In rural areas where some men do not fulfil their responsibilities as heads of family, women look upon their employers as their benefactors as they provide the women the possibility of earning even though their salaries might be ridiculously low. This regular income has however enable the women to negotiate the sharing of power within the family or even to participate in decision making (empowerment). The general deterioration of living conditions and patriarchal attitudes have forced them to look after their families and at the same time to take up an income generating occupation. On the other hand women are often the first victims of closure of industries. India has had only a mild experience of the Asian crisis, but considering the global crisis in certain manufacturing industries, is no exception to the loss of thousands of jobs among working women.

But the majority of the women met give the earnings to the father and in some cases to their husbands. So our first impressions confirm the fact that few women workers are empowered. Paradoxically in these industrialised rural areas, some of these women have sometimes been the only ones to have a regular employment in the formal sector. In these rural areas, where employment is seasonal, men are out of work or are forced to migrate temporarily to neighbouring towns for employment in construction and service sectors. So, it is less the entry in factory employment than the migration of men that contributes to the autonomy of women. Even if the men are at home without any job, none of them want to take care of the children or participate to any chores.

In this traditional society, changes in the relationship between men and women by the assumption of responsibility and power by women — idea of empowerment of women — can not be easily realised by new opportunities of employment, because of the patriarchal nature of rural society and a biased view about the respective responsibilities of the husband and the wife. It is taken for granted that men work because they are the primary breadwinners.

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