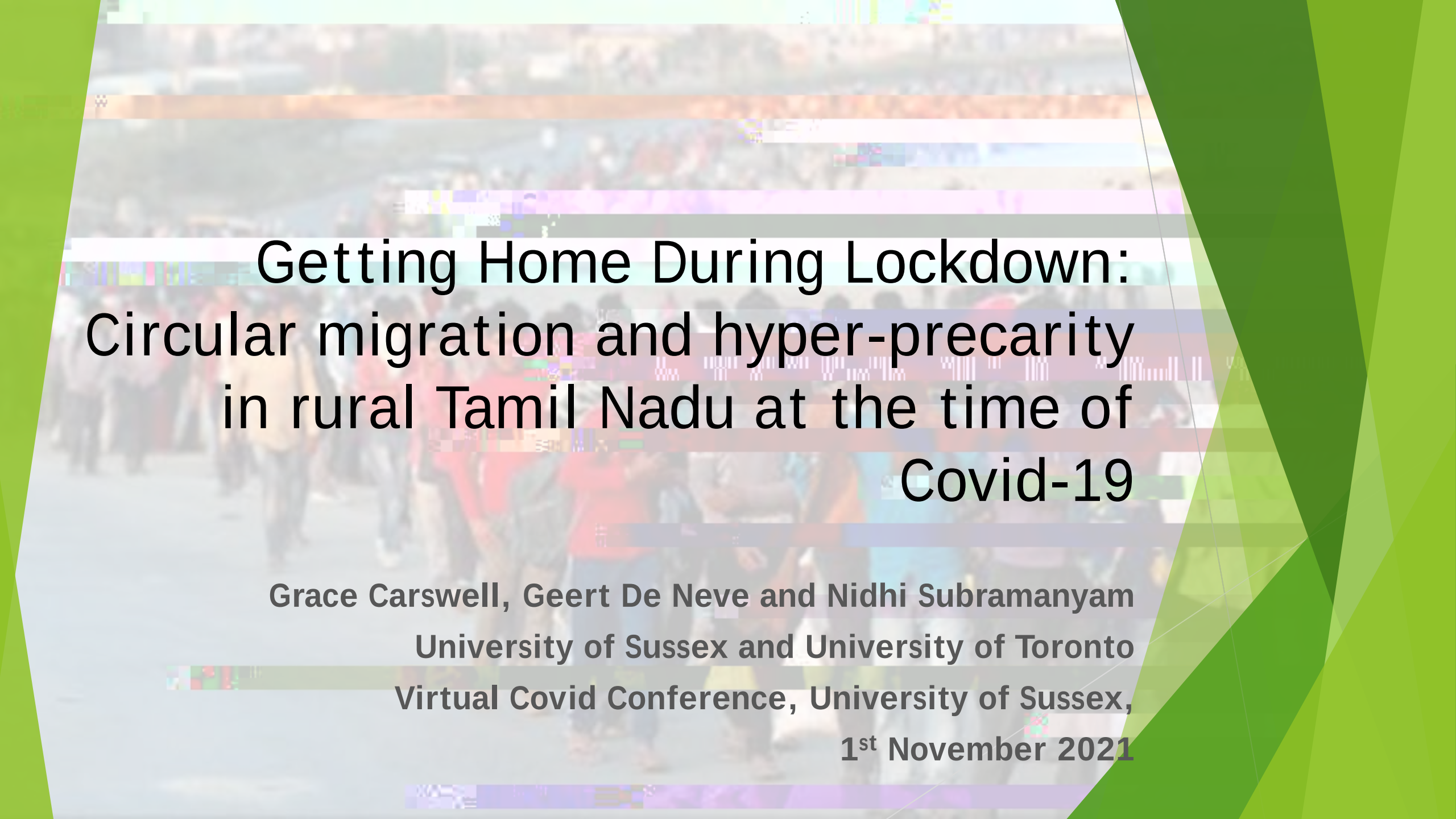




Getting Home During Lockdown: Circular migration and hyper-precarity in rural Tamil Nadu at the time of Covid-19

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Research context

- ▶ Tiruppur textile region in Tamil Nadu, South India
 - ▶ Focus on interstate migrants (Bihar and UP) working in powerlooms and sizing mills
- ▶ Migrant workers:
 - ▶ Men, mainly young and unmarried (age 16 onwards)
 - ▶ Provided accommodation on site, next to units, but live segregated from local workers and villagers
 - ▶ Working 12-hour shifts, 7 days/week, 30 days/month.

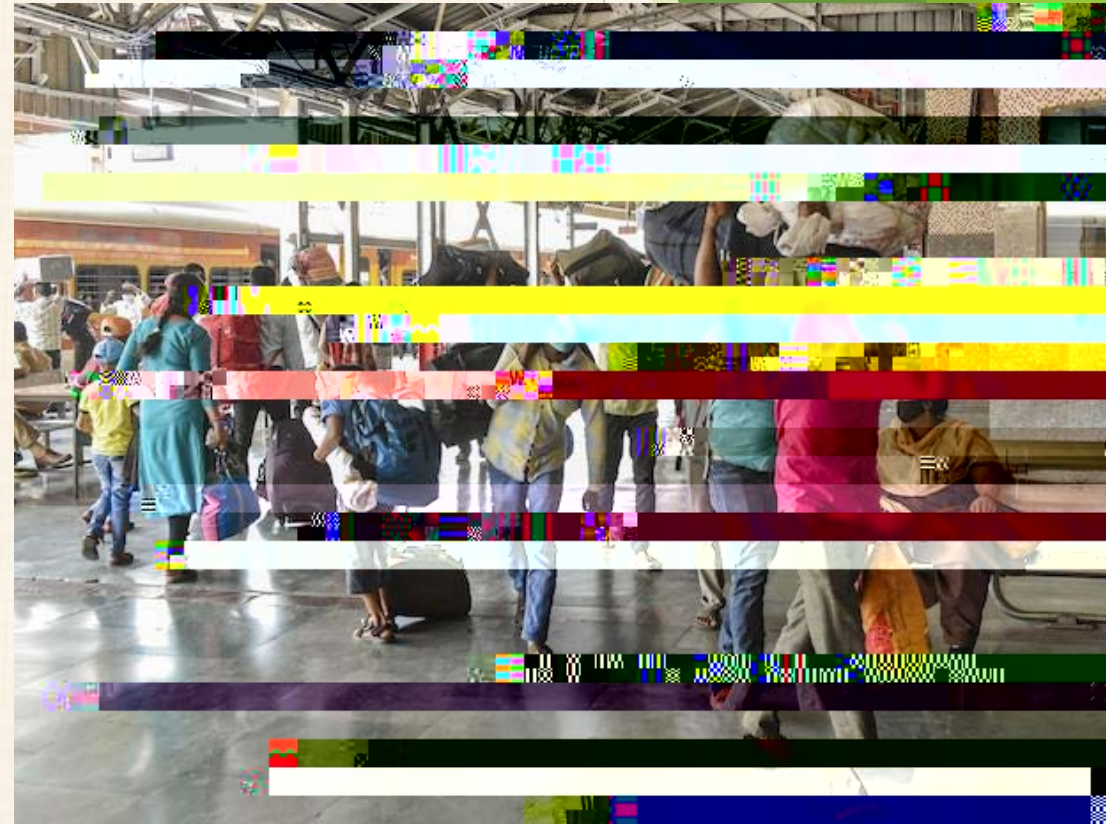


Three interrelated conceptual frameworks:

- 1) **Local labour control regimes:** Employment of flexible and informal labour is a core strategy of capital to reduce production costs and enhance control over labour, incl. migrant labour (Fudge 2019).
- 2) **“Hyper-precarity”:** captures the compounded precarity of migrant workers: Class-based extraction and exploitation; Migration-related exploitation; and Identity-based discrimination and exploitation (Lewis et al 2015; Lerche and Shah 2018).
- 3) **Social reproduction of circular migrants:** hyper-precarity of migrants is further entrenched by the separation of the productive and reproductive 1 (h)Ccs1 (er)-1 ()-5en yhr

Four phases emerged

1. Immediate aftermath of lockdown
2. Journeys home
3. Surviving back at home
4. Planning to return to Tamil Nadu



1 - Immediate aftermath of lockdown

- ▶ 25th March 2020 – all work ceased and migrant workers were ‘stuck’ in their factory rooms, without cash
- ▶ Employers provided food or money for food, but this was deducted from outstanding wages!
- ▶ Crucially, employers initially tried to keep hold of migrant workers: they kept them on site, withheld wages due from previous months, and refused to support return journeys
- ▶ No food provisions through local state resources; marginal to village life
- ▶ All became increasingly desperate to return home – fear and anxiety
- ▶ Ranjit: *if the owner had allowed us to return then [at the start of lockdown], I could have returned with Rs 2,500 by train. But he*

2 - Journeys home

- ▶ **Shramik Special trains from 1st May 2020**
 - ▶ Anand: secured a free travel pass, with food and water
 - ▶ Sanjeev: paid Rs 2000 for train ticket
 - ▶ Logesh: filled multiple forms but didn't get ticket
- ▶ **Hiring private buses (May-June 2020)**
 - ▶ Groups of workers (paid Rs 8-10,000 per seat)
 - ▶ Logesh: was owed Rs 5000 in unpaid wages; given some money for food; mother sent Rs 8,700 for bus
 - ▶ Danvir: owed wages; no money for food; family back home borrowed Rs10,000 for return ticket
- ▶ Eventually, employers let them go, BUT without settling their wages. They made promises to pay their wages when they reached home *or* on return to TN.





4 - Future plans

- ▶ By July 2020 all were contemplating returning to Tamil Nadu; 'lives on hold'; not *whether* to return, but *when* and *how*
- ▶ Strategies of employers changed: due the renewed need for labour, they tried to lure workers back:
 - ▶ phone calls;
 - ▶ offers of transport;
 - ▶ reassurances about settling withheld wages;
 - ▶ promises about increased daily wage rates.
- ▶ Some started travelling back to Tamil Nadu as soon as July 2020, but others were hesitant given the many uncertainties ahead.

Some conclusions

- ▶ During the first lockdown, employers' labour control regime drew on flexible strategies aimed at:
 - first retaining workers at the start of lockdown,
 - then disposing of them when factories lay idle,
 - finally luring them back when production was restarted.
- ▶ Those strategies constituted a local labour control regime that produced the simultaneous disposability and un