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Social Relations, And Cultural Patterns In Tiruppur: A Historical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the economic organization, social relations, and cultural patterns in Tiruppur through a historical lens, situating the region within broader shifts in South Indian economic and social structures. The analysis traces the transformation of Tiruppur from an agrarian settlement embedded in caste-based occupational hierarchies to a major textile production centre integrated into global markets. Attention is given to the restructuring of labour systems, including the movement from hereditary labour arrangements to wage-based industrial employment, alongside the emergence of small-scale entrepreneurial networks that facilitated export-oriented growth. The study also evaluates changes in social relations, particularly the reconfiguration of caste dynamics under conditions of industrial expansion, migration, and urbanization. It considers the persistence of caste as a structuring force in labour segmentation and community organization, while also noting new forms of social mobility enabled by industrial capital and market access. Gender relations are examined in relation to labour participation, highlighting the incorporation of women into textile production and the resulting shifts in household economies. Cultural patterns in Tiruppur are analysed in relation to economic change, focusing on the adaptation of local traditions, religious practices, and associational life within an industrializing context.

Keywords: Tiruppur; Economic Organization; Textile Industry; Labour Systems; Caste Relations; Industrialization; Migration; Social Change; Cultural Practices; Urbanization

Introduction

The study of regional transformations in South India requires attention to the interrelation between economic structures, social hierarchies, and cultural expressions across time. Tiruppur, presently recognized as a major textile production centre, offers a compelling case for examining these interconnections within a historically grounded framework. Its evolution from a predominantly agrarian locality into an export-oriented industrial cluster reflects broader processes of economic change, labour reorganization, and social restructuring that accompanied late colonial and post-independence developments in Tamil Nadu. Economic organization in Tiruppur has undergone a marked transition,

moving from land-based production systems and caste-regulated occupations toward decentralized industrial networks centred on textile manufacturing. ¹This shift involved the rise of small and medium enterprises, subcontracting arrangements, and flexible labour practices, which collectively shaped a distinctive model of industrial growth. Such transformations were not isolated economic phenomena; they were embedded in pre-existing social relations and, in turn, reshaped them. The restructuring of labour—from tied and hereditary forms to wage-based employment altered patterns of dependency, mobility, and class formation. Social relations in Tiruppur reveal both continuity and change. Caste, as an organizing principle, continued to influence occupational distribution, access to capital, and community networks, even as industrialization introduced new avenues for economic mobility. Migration, both intra-state and inter-state, contributed to a more heterogeneous social composition, complicating earlier hierarchies while generating new forms of segmentation within the labour force. Gender relations also experienced shifts, particularly with the increased participation of women in textile-related work, affecting household economies and social expectations.

Cultural patterns in Tiruppur must be understood in relation to these economic and social developments. Religious institutions, festivals, and associational practices adapted to the rhythms of industrial life, while also serving as sites for maintaining continuity with earlier traditions.² The interaction between long-settled communities and migrant populations produced negotiated cultural forms, reflecting both accommodation and differentiation. These developments indicate that cultural life in Tiruppur did not merely respond to economic change but actively mediated it. By situating Tiruppur within a diachronic framework, this study examines the layered processes through which economic organization, social relations, and cultural patterns have been constituted and reconstituted. The analysis draws on historical records, local narratives, and secondary scholarship to present a structured account of change, with attention to both structural continuities and emerging configurations.

Transition from Agrarian Production to Textile Industrialization

The shift from an agrarian economy to a textile-oriented industrial base in Tiruppur generated a reconfiguration of capital accumulation processes that departed from land-centered wealth. In the late colonial period, capital formation remained tied to agrarian surplus extraction, merchant intermediation, and caste-based control over land and trade. With the gradual emergence of textile production—initially through small weaving units and later through knitting and garment manufacturing—capital began to circulate through production-oriented investment rather than landholding. Post-independence expansion accelerated this transition. Capital accumulation increasingly relied on reinvested profits from textile exports, informal credit networks, and rotating capital within kinship-based business groups.³ Ownership structures shifted from landlord dominance to a dispersed model of entrepreneurial proprietorship, often embedded within caste and familial networks. This produced a hybrid ownership regime in which small and medium enterprises operated alongside export-oriented firms, creating a layered industrial structure. Market integration expanded significantly across this period. While agrarian markets had been regionally bounded, textile industrialization integrated Tiruppur into national and eventually global circuits of trade. The emergence of export linkages, especially from the late twentieth century onward, connected local production units to international demand patterns, thereby altering price mechanisms, production cycles, and investment strategies.⁴

Decentralized Production Networks and the Formal–Informal Interface

The rise of decentralized production networks in Tiruppur redefined the relationship between formal and informal sectors. Subcontracting became a dominant organizational form, allowing large export firms to outsource various stages of production knitting, dyeing, stitching, and finishing to smaller units. This arrangement minimized fixed capital costs for lead firms while distributing risk across a wide

network of dependent producers. Small-scale enterprises operated within a semi-formalized structure: while legally recognized in some cases, their labour practices, accounting systems, and regulatory compliance often remained informal. This created a continuum rather than a binary division between formal and informal sectors.⁵

The informal sector did not exist outside industrial capitalism but functioned as an integral component of its cost-reduction strategy. Such decentralization facilitated rapid scalability and flexibility in production, enabling Tiruppur to respond to fluctuating global demand. At the same time, it fragmented labour organization and weakened regulatory oversight, embedding informality within the core of the industrial system rather than at its margins.

Labour Control, Flexibility, and Class Formation

The transition from hereditary occupational systems to wage-based employment introduced new mechanisms of labour control and flexibility. In the agrarian and pre-industrial context, labour relations were mediated through caste hierarchies and customary obligations. Industrialization disrupted these structures, replacing them with contractual and semi-contractual wage relations. However, this shift did not produce a fully standardized labour market. Instead, multiple forms of labour flexibility emerged, including piece-rate payment systems, temporary employment, migrant labour recruitment, and gender-differentiated work allocation. Employers exercised control through fragmented work processes, subcontracting chains, and the absence of long-term employment guarantees. Class formation in Tiruppur thus developed in a segmented manner.⁶ A distinct entrepreneurial class emerged from trading and agrarian backgrounds, while the labour force remained internally differentiated along lines of skill, migration status, gender, and contractual stability. The persistence of informal labour arrangements limited the consolidation of a unified industrial working class, resulting in a stratified labour structure with varying degrees of precarity. Export-oriented industrialization exerted a transformative influence on local economic institutions in Tiruppur. Credit systems evolved from traditional moneylending and community-based finance to more diversified arrangements, including bank credit, export financing, and supplier credit networks. Despite this shift, informal credit mechanisms continued to operate alongside formal institutions, especially for small-scale producers lacking collateral.⁷ Trade associations and industrial bodies assumed a central role in coordinating production, mediating disputes, and representing industry interests. These associations facilitated collective responses to regulatory changes, labour issues, and international market pressures. They also contributed to the standardization of production practices and the dissemination of market information.⁸

The development of industrial clusters further strengthened Tiruppur's economic base. Spatial concentration of firms enabled economies of scale, shared infrastructure, and specialized labour pools. Cluster dynamics enhanced competitiveness by reducing transaction costs and fostering inter-firm linkages, even within a decentralized production framework. Export growth thus did not merely expand output but reshaped the institutional architecture of the local economy, embedding Tiruppur within a globalized production system while retaining distinctive features of localized, network-based industrial organization.

Historical Foundations: From Agrarian Locality to Industrial Cluster

The transformation of Tiruppur must be situated within a longer historical sequence linking agrarian production, colonial commercial penetration, and post-independence industrial policy. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the region formed part of a dry-zone agrarian economy dependent on tank irrigation, seasonal rainfall, and smallholder cultivation. Cotton cultivation and handloom weaving existed, but production remained dispersed and limited in scale. Colonial market

integration introduced new commercial circuits, especially through rail connectivity and the expansion of cotton trade. By the 1930s–1940s, small knitting units began to appear, supported by merchant capital and localized skill formation. However, the decisive shift occurred after independence, particularly from the 1970s onward, when Tiruppur emerged as a knitwear hub. Export-oriented growth accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, aligning local production with global demand.¹⁰ Statistically, this transition is reflected in the rapid expansion of industrial output and exports. Tiruppur's knitwear exports, estimated at less than ₹50 crore in the early 1980s, crossed ₹1,000 crore by the early 1990s and exceeded ₹30,000 crore by the late 2010s. The region came to account for nearly 45–50 percent of India's knitwear exports, indicating its centrality within national textile production. The number of industrial units expanded from a few hundred in the 1970s to over 10,000 units by the 2010s, including knitting, dyeing, and garmenting segments. This historical shift demonstrates a transition from land-based surplus extraction to industrial capital accumulation, accompanied by the integration of Tiruppur into global commodity chains.

Caste Reconfiguration: From Occupational Fixity to Networked Capital

Caste-based occupational structures, while weakened in their traditional form, persisted through new institutional roles. Historically, caste regulated labour division within agrarian and artisanal systems. In the industrial context, these rigidities loosened, enabling cross-caste entry into textile production. Yet caste did not disappear; instead, it adapted as a mechanism for organizing capital, trust, and enterprise. Empirical observations suggest that a significant proportion of early entrepreneurs in Tiruppur originated from intermediate agrarian castes with prior access to land and trade networks. These groups converted agrarian surplus into industrial investment, often through kinship-based financing. Informal credit systems frequently organized along caste lines continued to supply working capital, particularly for small-scale units. At the same time, lower-caste groups entered the labour force in large numbers.¹¹ However, their representation remained concentrated in low-wage and less secure segments of the industry. Survey-based estimates from textile clusters indicate that over 60–70 percent of unskilled and semi-skilled workers belonged to historically marginalized communities, while ownership remained disproportionately concentrated among a narrower set of social groups. Thus, caste persisted not as a fixed occupational order but as a flexible structure embedded in capital formation, labour allocation, and enterprise networks.¹²

Migration Dynamics and Labour Market Stratification

Migration has been central to Tiruppur's industrial expansion, reshaping both its demographic composition and labour hierarchy. By the 2010s, migrant workers were estimated to constitute between 40 and 60 percent of the total workforce in the textile sector. Intra-state migrants from districts such as Erode, Dindigul, and Madurai initially dominated, but inter-state migration increased significantly after the 2000s. Workers from states including Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal entered Tiruppur's labour market through contractor-mediated systems. These migrants often occupied the most precarious positions, characterized by temporary contracts, dormitory-style housing, and limited access to welfare provisions. Wage differentials between local and migrant workers, though variable, have been observed in the range of 10–20 percent in certain segments. Migration introduced new forms of social differentiation that intersected with caste. While caste networks continued to shape opportunities for local workers, migrant labour was organized through regional and linguistic identities. This produced a multi-layered labour hierarchy structured by origin, skill, and employment status. Community organization also shifted. Traditional caste-based settlements coexisted with migrant enclaves, often segregated by language and employment type. These developments contributed to a fragmented social structure, with limited integration between different segments of the workforce.¹³

Entrepreneurial Expansion and Labour Segmentation

The emergence of a large number of small and medium enterprises generated new class relations within Tiruppur. By the 2010s, the region hosted thousands of export-oriented firms, alongside a much larger number of subcontracting units. This created a stratified industrial structure in which a relatively small number of lead firms coordinated production, while numerous smaller units operated at lower levels of the value chain. The entrepreneurial class expanded significantly, drawing from agrarian, trading, and artisan backgrounds. Entry barriers remained relatively low in the early phases, allowing for broad participation. However, over time, capital requirements, technological upgrading, and export compliance standards increased, leading to consolidation within the sector. On the labour side, the workforce expanded to several hundred thousand workers, with estimates ranging from 500,000 to 600,000 individuals directly employed in the textile and garment sectors in and around Tiruppur. Despite this scale, labour organization remained weak. Unionization rates were low, and employment was characterized by high levels of informality, with a substantial proportion of workers engaged on a contract or piece-rate basis. Class relations thus developed in a segmented manner. A relatively cohesive entrepreneurial class coexisted with a fragmented labour force differentiated by skill, migration status, and contractual conditions. Caste identities intersected with these class positions, reinforcing patterns of inequality and limiting collective labour mobilization.

Gender Transformations: Women's Labour and Household Economies

The incorporation of women into Tiruppur's textile industry marked a significant shift in gender relations, particularly in relation to wage labour and household economies. Women came to constitute a substantial share of the workforce in garmenting and ancillary processes. Estimates suggest that women accounted for approximately 50–60 percent of workers in certain segments of the industry, especially in stitching and finishing units. This increased participation contributed to changes in household income structures. Dual-income households became more common, and women's earnings played a role in supporting consumption, education, and debt repayment. In some cases, this reduced reliance on agrarian income and enhanced economic resilience. However, gender disparities persisted. Women's wages were typically lower than those of male workers, often by margins of 20–30 percent for comparable tasks. Employment conditions were also characterized by insecurity, limited upward mobility, and occupational segregation. Schemes such as fixed-term employment contracts for young women workers sometimes tied to lump-sum payments introduced new forms of labour control that combined economic incentives with restrictive conditions. Social norms adapted unevenly. While women's participation in wage labour increased their visibility in public spaces and contributed to gradual shifts in attitudes toward education and mobility, patriarchal constraints remained influential in shaping decision-making within households.

Institutional Transformation: Credit, Associations, and Cluster Dynamics

The expansion of export-oriented production reshaped local economic institutions in Tiruppur. Credit systems diversified, combining formal banking channels with informal finance. Despite increased access to institutional credit, small-scale producers continued to rely heavily on informal lending, supplier credit, and advance payments from exporters. Trade associations became central to the coordination of industrial activity. Organizations representing exporters, manufacturers, and ancillary units facilitated collective bargaining, dispute resolution, and engagement with state agencies. These associations also contributed to the dissemination of market information and compliance standards required for global trade. Cluster dynamics strengthened the region's competitiveness. The spatial concentration of firms enabled shared infrastructure, specialized labour markets, and rapid diffusion of technology and practices. At the

same time, environmental pressures particularly related to dyeing and water usage led to regulatory interventions, including the establishment of common effluent treatment plants. The industrialization of Tiruppur produced significant economic growth, employment generation, and global integration. However, these developments were accompanied by persistent social inequalities and new forms of stratification. Caste adapted rather than disappeared, migration introduced additional hierarchies, class relations remained segmented, and gender disparities continued within changing labour markets. Yet these must be read alongside qualitative changes in social organization, where older hierarchies coexist with new economic forms. Tiruppur's experience illustrates a pattern of industrial modernity characterized by layered social change: economic expansion proceeds alongside the reconfiguration, rather than elimination, of entrenched social structures. A historical materialist reading of Tiruppur situates its transformation within the changing relations of production and the corresponding reorganization of social life. In the pre-industrial phase, the economic base rested on agrarian production, with surplus extraction mediated through land control, caste hierarchy, and localized exchange. Social relations were structured through caste-determined labour obligations, while cultural practices ritual hierarchy, kinship norms, and community organization reflected and stabilized this economic order.

The expansion of textile industrialization reconstituted this base by shifting the primary locus of surplus generation from land to industrial production. Capital accumulation increasingly derived from commodity production for external markets, particularly through export-oriented knitwear. This transition altered relations of production: wage labour replaced hereditary service, and ownership shifted toward entrepreneurial capital embedded in small and medium enterprises. However, the superstructural elements—caste identities, kinship networks, and community affiliations—did not disappear. Instead, they were rearticulated to support the new economic order. Caste became a mechanism for mobilizing capital and labour, while cultural norms adapted to industrial rhythms, including long working hours, migration, and urban residence. The result is not a linear transition from “traditional” to “modern,” but a layered formation in which older social structures persist within new economic relations, consistent with a historical materialist understanding of uneven and combined development.

Archival Records, Oral Histories, and Local Narratives

The reconstruction of Tiruppur's socio-economic evolution requires a multi-source methodological approach that integrates archival, oral, and locally embedded forms of evidence. Archival records such as colonial administrative reports, district gazetteers, revenue documents, and early industrial surveys provide quantitative and institutional data on land tenure, crop patterns, trade flows, and the initial emergence of textile activities. These sources allow for the tracing of structural changes across the late colonial and early post-independence periods. Oral histories contribute a different dimension by capturing lived experiences of transition. Narratives from early entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and women labourers reveal processes that are not always visible in official records: the role of informal credit, the formation of subcontracting networks, and the everyday negotiation of labour conditions. Oral accounts also illuminate shifts in social norms, including attitudes toward work, mobility, and gender roles. Local narrative sources—including community histories, caste records, and temple-centered accounts—offer insights into the longer continuity of social organization. While inscriptional evidence in the immediate Tiruppur region is relatively limited compared to older temple centers, nearby inscriptional traditions and localized memory practices provide context for understanding historical patterns of landholding, patronage, and social hierarchy.¹⁴

When read critically, these sources help reconstruct a diachronic sequence in which agrarian, artisanal, and industrial phases are interconnected rather than isolated.

Regional Industrialization: Conformity and Divergence within South India

Tiruppur's development both aligns with and departs from broader models of regional industrialization in South India. In line with established patterns, its growth reflects the importance of small and medium enterprises, the role of caste-based networks in capital formation, and the significance of cluster-based industrial organization. Similar features can be observed in other regional clusters, such as textile production in Coimbatore or leather industries in parts of Tamil Nadu. At the same time, Tiruppur exhibits distinctive characteristics that complicate these models. Its extreme reliance on decentralized subcontracting networks, combined with a high degree of export orientation, sets it apart from more vertically integrated industrial centers. The scale of its global integration accounting for a substantial share of India's knitwear exports indicates a level of external market dependence that exceeds many comparable clusters. Furthermore, the intensity of labour informality and the scale of migrant labour incorporation introduce dynamics that challenge conventional frameworks of industrialization based on formal sector growth and stable labour relations. Tiruppur thus represents a form of industrial development characterized by flexibility, fragmentation, and global connectivity, requiring a rethinking of linear or uniform models of regional industrialization.¹⁵

Pre-Industrial Structures and Contemporary Industrial Practices

Despite significant economic transformation, multiple continuities can be identified between pre-industrial social structures and contemporary industrial practices in Tiruppur. In the domain of labour, the shift from hereditary occupations to wage employment did not eliminate hierarchical differentiation. Instead, new forms of labour segmentation—based on skill, contract type, gender, and migration status reproduce patterns of inequality analogous to earlier caste-based divisions. Hierarchy continues to operate as a structuring principle, though in modified form. In the agrarian context, hierarchy was overtly codified through caste status and land ownership. In the industrial context, it is mediated through control over capital, access to markets, and position within production networks. Nevertheless, these economic hierarchies often intersect with caste identities, preserving elements of social stratification. Community formation also exhibits continuity alongside change. Traditional village-based communities organized around caste and kinship have given way, in part, to urban-industrial communities shaped by workplace relations and migrant networks. However, caste associations, kinship ties, and region-based solidarities continue to influence social interaction, access to resources, and patterns of settlement. These continuities indicate that industrialization in Tiruppur has not produced a complete break with the past. Instead, it has reconfigured existing social structures within a new economic framework, resulting in a hybrid formation in which historical legacies remain embedded in contemporary practices. The historical evolution of Tiruppur demonstrates a layered transformation in which economic restructuring has unfolded alongside persistent and reconfigured social relations.

Demographic Expansion and Workforce Composition

The industrialization of Tiruppur has been accompanied by rapid demographic growth and labour concentration. By the late 2010s, the textile and garment sector in and around Tiruppur employed an estimated 500,000–600,000 workers, making it one of the largest labour-intensive clusters in South India. A significant proportion of this workforce consists of migrants, with estimates suggesting that **40–60 percent** of workers are drawn from outside the immediate region. Within this workforce, segmentation is clearly visible:

- **Local workers** often access semi-skilled or relatively stable positions through social networks.
- **Inter-state migrants** are concentrated in low-wage, high-intensity segments, frequently employed through contractors.

This demographic composition indicates that industrial growth has not produced a unified labour structure but a differentiated one shaped by origin, skill, and employment conditions. Caste continues to structure access to economic opportunities, though in transformed ways. Field-based estimates suggest:

- **60–70 percent** of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers belong to historically marginalized caste groups.
- Ownership and entrepreneurial control remain disproportionately concentrated among **intermediate and dominant caste groups**, particularly those with prior access to land or trade capital.

This distribution indicates that while occupational mobility has expanded in formal terms, structural inequalities persist in access to capital, enterprise ownership, and upward mobility. Caste operates less as a rigid occupational boundary and more as a stratifying influence within class formation.

Gender Composition and Labour Participation

The incorporation of women into textile production represents a major social shift, particularly in labour-intensive segments:

- Women constitute approximately **50–60 percent** of the workforce in garmenting, stitching, and finishing units.
- Wage disparities remain significant, with women earning **20–30 percent less** than male workers for comparable work in many units.

Women's participation has contributed to the emergence of dual-income households and increased household liquidity. However, this has not been accompanied by proportional changes in decision-making authority, indicating the persistence of patriarchal structures within changing economic conditions. A defining feature of Tiruppur's industrial system is the dominance of informal and semi-formal employment arrangements:

- An estimated **70–80 percent** of the workforce operates under informal conditions, including contract labour, piece-rate work, and temporary employment.
- Unionization rates remain low, often below **10 percent**, limiting collective bargaining capacity.

These figures highlight the structural centrality of informality within the industrial economy, where flexibility is prioritized over employment security.

- The scale of employment (500,000+) indicates the depth of industrial transformation.
- The high proportion of migrants (up to 60%) reveals the dependence on mobile labour.
- The dominance of informal employment (70–80%) reflects structural labour precarity.
- The gendered wage gap (20–30%) and caste-based occupational concentration indicate persistent inequalities these indicators demonstrate that Tiruppur's development represents a form of industrial modernity characterized by structural layering.
- Economic growth, labour expansion, and global integration coexist with enduring hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and migration status.

The historical trajectory of Tiruppur thus affirms that industrialization, rather than dissolving social structures, reorganizes them within new economic frameworks, producing a complex configuration of continuity and change.¹⁶

Conclusion

The historical evolution of Tiruppur reveals a form of industrial transformation in which economic expansion and social continuity remain closely intertwined. The transition from an agrarian economy to a textile-based industrial cluster altered the material basis of production, shifting surplus generation from land to manufacturing and export-oriented activity. Yet, this transformation did not dissolve earlier social structures; instead, it reorganized them within new institutional and economic contexts. However, the composition of this workforce where 40–60 percent are migrants and nearly 70–80 percent are engaged in informal or semi-formal employment indicates that labour flexibility and precarity remain central features of the industrial system. These conditions have produced a segmented labour structure rather than a unified working class. Caste continues to shape economic life, though in modified forms. While hereditary occupational boundaries have weakened, access to capital, enterprise ownership, and skilled employment remains unevenly distributed. A significant proportion around 60–70 percent of unskilled labour is drawn from historically marginalized communities, whereas entrepreneurial control tends to be concentrated among socially and economically advantaged groups. Caste thus persists as a structuring influence within class relations, operating through networks of capital, trust, and social organization. Gender relations exhibit a similar pattern of partial transformation. Women's participation in textile production, accounting for 50–60 percent of the workforce in certain segments, has altered household economies and expanded income sources. Nevertheless, wage disparities of 20–30 percent and limited occupational mobility point to the continued influence of patriarchal norms within industrial labour markets. Migration has introduced new dimensions of social differentiation, adding layers of regional and linguistic identity to existing hierarchies. The coexistence of caste-based local networks and migrant labour enclaves has produced a fragmented social environment, where integration remains limited and stratification is reinforced through multiple axes these developments indicate that Tiruppur's industrialization represents a process of structural layering rather than replacement. Economic organization, social relations, and cultural patterns have evolved in interaction, producing a hybrid formation in which older hierarchies are reconstituted within new economic arrangements. The persistence of informality, the segmentation of labour, and the adaptation of caste and gender relations demonstrate that industrial growth does not inherently generate social homogenization. In analytical terms, Tiruppur challenges linear models of industrial development that assume a transition toward formalization, class cohesion, and institutional stability. Instead, it illustrates a pattern of uneven transformation, where global market integration coexists with localized social structures and differentiated labour regimes. The historical study of Tiruppur therefore points to a broader conclusion: industrial modernity in this context is defined not by the disappearance of historical forms, but by their reconfiguration within changing economic conditions.

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