# Chapter 15
# The Convergence of Labour and Debt Struggles

On 19 April 2016, the Karnataka Government imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, prohibiting the assembly of more than ten people in an area. The hasty and drastic decision was a reaction to one of the largest worker's protests that Bengaluru had seen in years and an expression of how government officials and police were taken by surprise by the massive demonstrations. More than 120,000 people – mostly female garment workers – had taken on the street since the day before, shutting down major roadways and blocking industrial areas all over the megacity. Neither officials nor unions had predicted anything like this and had difficulties making sense of what had happened: The 'flash strikes', as the newspapers referred to the unfolding events, seemed to have no leaders; they were not orchestrated or announced by unions or civil society organisations, and perhaps most remarkable, women workers headed these powerful protests.

The massive wave of local resistance was sparked by the announcement of the NDA government a few weeks earlier to reform the Employees Provident Fund (EPF), one of the largest social security schemes in the world (in terms of clientele), mainly covering public sector and industrial workers in India. According to the scheme, a share of salaried workers' income must be invested in the fund and is matched by a compulsory contribution on the side of employers, while ¾ of EPF corpus derives from worker's income and only ¼ from the employer's contribution. If certain conditions are met, like being unemployed for two months or reaching the age of retirement, workers can access the full amount, including interest accrued in the meantime. In 2018, roughly US$ 160 billion was under the management of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), which comes under the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment. Like in many other economies around the globe, corporate lobbyists and neoliberal policymakers had pushed for the financialisation of the pension scheme for years, allowing the substantial amount of assets under management to be invested in the share market.[1] The NDA government aggressively pushed

1 For global trends of the financialisation of pension schemes, see e.g. Bonizzi et al. (2021) and Braun (2022).

for this trend after coming to power in 2014. In the financial year of 2015 – 2016, the Ministry of Labour and Employment allowed the EPFO to invest between 5 and 15 per cent of its incremental corpus in equities. Hence, in 2015 Rs. 5,000 crores (roughly one billion US dollars) were placed in stocks through Exchange Traded Funds (ETF), which gradually increased in the following years.

Chitra Ramkrishna, CEO of the National Stock Exchange, was clearly excited about the shift: "EPFO's entry in stock markets will unlock savings into nation building. [...] It will certainly deepen the financial market in India." (The Economic Times 2015). However, the benefits of these investments in "nation-building" were distributed somewhat unevenly. Since government guarantees do not back the provident fund, losses result in reduced employee returns. By early 2020, the EPFO had invested more than Rs. 100,000 crores (roughly 75 billion US dollars) in the stock market but suffered losses of 8.29 per cent of the invested amount (Ray 2020). Moreover, employees did not only bear the losses of financial speculation. Restrictions on employees' access to the fund accompanied the creeping financialisation of India's pension scheme. To prevent workers from accessing the money before retirement age, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley proposed adding 60 per cent of the EPF corpus upon withdrawal to employees' taxable income and raising the retirement age from 55 years to 58 years. Even more critical for precarious workers, however, the plan was to withhold the employers' share in cases of unemployment. According to the proposal circulated in early 2016, employees would be allowed to withdraw only their portion of the EPF (incl. interest) after two months of unemployment, depriving workers of almost one-quarter of the whole EPF corpus, namely the employer's contribution. Workers and unions referred to this as 'single PF'. Moreover, women would be granted the money in cases of marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth *only* if they had signed an affidavit that they would not take up future employment (PUCL-K and WSS 2019, 17).

The EPF reform plans were undoubtedly an assault on workers' rights, and they sparked criticism and protests nationwide. Yet, neither politicians nor others had expected that the changes would spark such fierce and concentrated resistance as was visible in Bengaluru in mid-April 2016. When garment factory management informed workers about the changes and those who left the job received only their contribution to the EPF, word spread quickly amongst the workforces. On April 16, 2016, a local newspaper report warned garment workers they would lose out on their PF money if they had not withdrawn it by the end of the month, and two days later, workers went on strike. The protests were sudden and eruptive, and the police resorted to violent repression of the strike (CSA_5, Pos. 37). Nonetheless, after only two days of intensive strike action, carried mainly by women workers, the central government backed down on their reform plans.

The two-day strike was historic, and it left many observers baffled. Why did Bengaluru's garment workers, of whom the vast majority is not organised in unions, so determinedly resist reform proposals on a pension scheme? This section claims that the answer is closely related to migrant workers' contemporary crisis of social reproduction and the relevance of reproductive debt. To make this argument plausible, we will first engage with the role of (gendered) exploitation in Bengaluru's garment industry and explore how it is linked to workers' crisis of social reproduction before unravelling the role of reproductive debt and the EPF as garment workers' safety net. Finally, some observations on the intensification of the crisis of social reproduction after the strike in April 2016 will be outlined. While the previous parts of the chapter explored how the interlocking dynamics of expropriation, exploitation, and exclusion shape the demand for reproductive credit amongst migrant workers, how these debts signify diverse forms of financial expropriation, and how these debts are lived through by juggling different types and sources of loans, the final part of the incorporated comparison highlights the conflictual nature of reproductive debts, foreshadowing how labour and debt struggles may converge.

## Gendered Exploitation in Garment Supply Chains

In the context of the emerging economic power of former colonies and the demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1960s and 1970s, the US, Canada and the EU thought to protect their garment industries from competition through a quota system that limited garment and textile imports from elsewhere, the so-called Multifibre Arrangement (MFA). With the liberalisation of global trade and the rise of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the 1990s, this protective measure was successively phased-out. As a result, global garment exports soared, increasing by 60 per cent between 2004 and 2011, with India becoming a significant hub for export-oriented production (Mani 2013). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, India's textile and clothing industry employed roughly 45 million (migrant) workers. It was valued at US$ 200 billion, contributing about 13 per cent of its industrial production and 12 per cent of export earnings (Majumdar, Shaw, and Sinha 2020). The rapid growth of the export-oriented output also spurred the expansion of particularly vibrant clusters around Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Tiruppur/Coimbatore. In Bengaluru, hundreds of production units mushroomed over the growing city, concentrating primarily in Boomanahalli, Mysore Road, and the Peenya industrial area. Since the early 2000s, the number of industrial (export-oriented) units and employed workers in Bengaluru has multiplied, turning the southern city into a hotspot of India's ready-made garment (RMG) industry, accounting for about 60 per cent of national garment exports (López 2021).

The rapid growth of Bengaluru's RMG industry was facilitated by intensifying exploitation with doubling production targets, increased surveillance, and aggressive anti-union rhetoric. A civil society activist and analyst of the sector recalls the significance and brutality of changing working conditions in Bengaluru's garment factories as follows:

> "The production targets increased enormously. If you talk to workers who were working in the 80s or early 90s, you would hear they were much more relaxed. They had to make 30 – 35 pieces per hour, and then you had some time to take a short nap, you had time to talk to your co-workers. That time was also not the time of the electric sowing machines. It used to be manual. They had more time, they had a much calmer work environment. After 1995, they saw this whole thing changing, screaming, yelling, and getting the production targets achieved. [...] Right now, it's about 80 – 120 pieces per hour. For every piece, every product they have a time machine. They see how many pieces could be made in few seconds, and that's how a production target is set [...] But what you don't consider is toilet breaks, water breaks, a break to just get up and stretch. And also, you don't measure – can you make the same production for the whole day, not recognising that the first hour or maybe first two hours are more productive as compared to the last hour of the day? The pressure remains the same throughout the day." (CSA_3, Pos. 4 – Pos. 6)

Unions and civil society organisations estimate that there were between 1,000 and 1,200 factories all over the city in 2018, employing more than 400,000 workers. Because many of them are small production units with less than 100 workers, they don't appear in official statistics and are not officially regulated under the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947.[2] While almost all workers in Bengaluru's garment industry are migrants, many unions and NGOs have observed a shift in migration patterns. During the 1990s and 2000s, most were intra-state migrants from Hassan, Chitradurga, Dharwad, Gulbarga, Hubli and other places in Karnataka. For about ten years, the number of migrants from distant states, especially from the East and Northeast India (Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam, etc.), has massively increased, with migrants travelling several thousand kilometres to toil in the booming sector (CSA_5, Pos. 48–53).

Most workers in Bengaluru's garment industry earn not more than the stipulated minimum wage, which has been heavily criticised by unions and civil society organisations for keeping labourers below the actual line of poverty (Mani, Mathew, and Bhattacharya 2018; RoyChowdhury 2015, 85). A 2012 survey amongst local garment workers suggested that average monthly wages were between Rs. 3,500 for unskilled workers (helper, ironer, checker) and Rs. 4,500 for tailors (GATWU 2012). The average monthly expenses, on the other hand, were more than twice as high as the

2 According to official figures, there are 766 factories with 282,000 workers in Bangalore.

regular average income, creating a considerable income-expenditure mismatch (see Table 5).[3]

*Table 5: Average Monthly Expenses of Factory Garment Workers in Bengaluru, 2012*

| **Category** | **Average monthly expense (Rs.)** | **Percent of total** |
|---|---|---|
| Food | 3855.22 | 41 % |
| Housing | 2081.67 | 22 % |
| Utilities | 400.97 | 4 % |
| Transport | 767.42 | 8 % |
| Education | 436.25 | 5 % |
| Health care | 476.41 | 5 % |
| Others | 1344.19 | 14 % |
| Total | 9362.34 | 100 % |

Source: GATWU (2012).

The average household expenses are, of course, subject to change over time, just as the payment of wages. In 2017 and 2019, the average wages had increased nominally, reaching between Rs. 7,000 – 8,000 per month and Rs. 9,000 – 10,000 per month, respectively (Anner and Dutta 2019; Mohan 2017).[4] However, the cost of housing (rent) has substantially increased in the context of rapid urbanisation, rising land prices and competition for space. Moreover, the trend of costly English private medium schools has also captured the urban poor as one of the main strategies to improve the livelihood chances of their children. Reflecting on these changes, a civil society activist reports the bleak prospects for worker's real incomes:

> "During Demonetisation, I had a series of meetings with workers. They get paid something like Rs. 7,000 – 8,000/month, out of which Rs. 4,000 goes immediately out for rent, which you pay in cash. Another Rs. 1,000 for school fees. If you have a medical emergency, you have to pay another Rs. 500 monthly. You need to pay

3 While women workers are not in all cases the only earners in the household, the majority of them are the principal breadwinner in their respective household.

4 Taking 2012 as baseline year, the Indian Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased from 100 in 2012 to 138.8 in 2018. Assuming a constant expenditure pattern, the households surveyed in 2012 would have total monthly expenses of roughly Rs. 13,000, indicating a modest increase in real wages. However, it is likely that rising house and food prices impact precarious worker's expenses disproportionately.

> the local doctor, and medication, and provisions for your house. They usually just have Rs. 500–600 left for other expenses. So, unless their salary increases dramatically, there is not much change possible. What they are cutting down is purchases because they don't have free cash. In the last six to seven years, there has been no substantial increase in wages. The wages, the daily wages adjustment and things like that have been very minimal. In fact, the real wage seems to be decreasing. Even though there are these small changes in your salary [...] it doesn't change your purchasing power." (CSA_2, Pos. 18)

Local unions and civil society organisations estimated a minimum monthly living wage in Bengaluru at least Rs. 18,000 (CSA_3, Pos. 43). The Asia Floor Wage Campaign (AFWC) even suggested a living wage of Rs. 23,588 in 2018 to cover support for all family members, basic nutritional needs, and other basic needs, including housing, healthcare, education, and some basic savings (AFWC 2018). In any case, the actual salaries of garment workers are grossly insufficient to meet their subsistence needs, even though many are primary breadwinners for their families. Wages below subsistence levels signify the super-exploitation of workers in global value chains, benefitting transnational capital and fuelling inequality (Gilbert 2022; Selwyn 2019; Suwandi 2019).

But cheap labour does not just exist. It is no natural disposition of particular peoples or regions, no matter how much mainstream economics seeks to naturalise it by claiming the universality of competitive advantage. Especially in labour surplus economies, it comes into existence by fragmenting and segmenting the labouring classes, for example, along gendered and racialised lines, disciplining a sense of inferiority, if necessary, through violence, and naturalising such assumptions of inequality in common sense (see Chapter 7). As Alessandra Mezzadri claims, cheap labour must be "manufactured, no less than T-shirts or jeans", and in this process, it can "bank on multiple socio-economic divides and inequalities" (Mezzadri 2017, 18), especially in contexts like India with significant regional disparities and massive reserve armies of labour.

Without a doubt, gendered hierarchies and violence are crucial to understanding the dismal working conditions in Bengaluru's RMG industry. While more than 90 per cent of the workforce are migrant women, almost all management and supervisory staff in the factories are men (CSA_2, Pos. 30). All interviewed unions, civil society organisations and academics observing the garment industry have emphasised how gendered violence is endemic to the industry and an essential part of disciplining the workforce and extracting surplus labour from women. According to a long-standing analyst of the garment sector, sexualised violence at the workplace has become normalised by many women workers because it is an ordinary, ever-present reality of their daily lives:

> "The stereotyping that is there in the family and the Indian culture of women being subservient is mirrored almost exactly at the factory. You have 85–90% workers, cutters, cleaners, packers, tailors. Almost all of them would be women in Bangalore. I'm not saying that the sector is like that in other places. [...] You are used to sexual harassment at home, you are used to sexual harassment on your journey from your home to the factory, so you normalise a lot sexual harassment in the factory, too. The tendency is towards that. These are all first-generation workers. These are not workers who come from a factory culture or who know factory issues or labour laws. Most of them would be semi-literate women, first-generation workers in a factory, with little to no exposure to labour rights, forget human rights" (CSA_2, Pos. 30)

These findings also resonate with other studies that have stressed how gendered discrimination, and patriarchal oppression cannot be understood solely in cultural terms and by focusing narrowly on the family/community as the unit of analysis. For example, Kavita Krishnan (2018) emphasises how familial regimes of gendered surveillance and extraction of women's labour must be understood in relation to one another (see also AFWC 2018; Bhattacharjee 2019; Wichterich 2019). The tight surveillance of women workers, through monitoring of toilet and canteen visits, constant threats of humiliation through verbal aggression or corporeal punishment, and public shaming are "used to discipline, demoralise and control the entire body of workers, not just the individual worker targeted". Moreover, such "[r]egimes of surveillance, sexualised abuse, sexual harassment and public humiliation are integral to the production process and used to keep the women workers insecure by pressuring them to meet impossible production targets" (Krishnan 2018, 81).

Furthermore, the fact that predominantly women are employed in the booming industry potentially challenges the gendered division of labour within the household economy, especially if male household members cannot find steady work. Even if garment workers are primary breadwinners, out of their homes for 12 hours a day or more, patriarchal norms still assign the burden of unpaid reproductive work (like cooking, cleaning and other household work) to them. In such a context, women workers are not only exposed to sexualised violence in factories but also to potentially increasing domestic violence:

> "More and more women take on the responsibility of being breadwinner. Men will not get employment very easily. There has been very unstable employment. Women who are domestic workers or garment workers they are going there, sticking around and continuing their work. Construction work is sporadic: three days you have work, three days you don't have. So, there's a lowering of the male role and status. And an increase of the responsibility and role of women. That itself has led to women not fulfilling effectively and efficiently their household chores, which they are supposed to do. While they are doing this, they are also

> expected to do this. You know, they go for garment sector work until 5.30, they make them work until 6, and by 7/7.30 they reach home. And nothing is cooked. They have to cook, they have to look after children – all that is blamed on the women. That is one major thing that is coming across. And women want to save their money, accounted for in their hands. […]As soon as you come back, you rush into some kind of other work. And that becomes a major conflict. In that sense, violence is there. Earlier, they were doing their role, the old structure was maintained, and the violence was not as constant. Now, there are more and more conflicts." (CSA_4, Pos. 67)

Beyond the grim reality of gendered violence and exploitation, the gendered nature of social reproductive work also affects the prospects for organising labour. While the central unions, usually affiliated with political parties, do not play a significant role in Bengaluru, the three biggest unions organizing garment workers, the Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU), the Garment Labour Union (GLU), and Karnataka Textile Worker Union (KTWU) together organise not more than 15,000 workers – a tiny fraction of the large and growing workforce of more than 400,000. While interlocking aspects of super-exploitation through excessive production targets and disciplining through harassment and union busting are important barriers to challenging existing labour control regimes (Dutta 2021; López 2021), it is essential to highlight that the question of collective organisation is gendered. The division between social reproduction and production figures prominently as obstacles to unionisation, as becomes clear from the following quote:

> "[…] when you look at these women, they are not just doing jobs in the factory, they have additional responsibilities at home. The factory timings are between 9am and 5.30pm. They have to go back home immediately, to cook, take care of the children, feed their children, clean the house, wash their cloths and utensils. They are so occupied from the time they get home, from 6pm to 10–10.30pm, that they don't even get time for themselves. On the way they have to purchase, if they require things for their home, same is true for groceries. Since they have both work at home and in the factories, they do not have – unlike a bus driver – he would go to work, come back in the evening, sit and have tea or coffee and watch television, and have plenty of time for himself. Unlike men, women do not have time to sit in the union office for a meeting. It's very difficult for them to go to union meetings, or to participate in campaigns for one or two days – that's impossible. And this is also the major obstacle in organising these workers. In all the efforts, supporting these women does not stop at the workplace. They would require emotional, mental, and other support in terms of what's happening in their families. Their husband is ill-treating them, there's physical abuse at home." (CSA_3, Pos. 31)

Despite many obstacles and generally low levels of unionisation, organising labour happens beyond the company's premises, for example, at factory gate meetings or in residential neighbourhoods. Compared to construction and domestic work, garment workers seem much better organised. Arguably, higher levels of unionisation also impact workers' effective access to social security schemes, a theme we will further explore in the following section.

## Reproductive Debt and Garment Workers' Safety Net(s)

The poor working conditions do not allow workers to improve their living standards, which, in many cases where workers care for a household of four or five, is below the subsistence level. Even if they work in the industry for 20 or 30 years, their livelihoods hardly improve (CSA_3, Pos. 16). According to the interviewed industry experts, the garment sector in Bengaluru has experienced a decline in real wages and a lack of economic empowerment in past years, given the surge in prices for housing, food, and other essentials (CSA_2, Pos. 18; see also RoyChowdhury 2018, 58). In this context, reproductive debt becomes an omnipresent reality and a necessary strategy for managing their precarity. A long-standing observer of Bengaluru's garment industry notes: "All the time, these workers have loans outstanding. I don't think you won't find anyone who has not taken a loan in this sector" (CSA_3, Pos. 55). A GATWU study from 2012 found that wages were insufficient to meet essential household expenditure, and 76 per cent of the interviewed workers were indebted with loan amounts totalling between Rs. 50,000 and Rs 100,000, i.e. the burden of debt being as high as an average *annual* household income in the sector (GATWU 2012). Another study suggests that when women workers leave the garment factories in their 30s, they hardly have any savings, and most have accumulated debts ranging from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 500,000 (Mezzadri and Majumder 2020, 18). In most cases, the demand for loans is driven by reproductive needs, while entrepreneurial investments are irrelevant. Moreover, loans taken by the urban working poor are often related to the agrarian crisis discussed at the beginning of the chapter:

> "Many take it for education, marriage in the family, advance for housing, festivals at the native place, no rain at home, and relatives at native place won't have anything to dig borewell, to build a house at native place. Like this, they take many loans. [...] They take loans amount for more than one lakh and repay them. [...] Initially, they take 10,000, then after paying that they get 20,000, and then 30,000 etc. As per repayment, they get more money. When there are 2–4 persons at home, they all take loans and repay them." (CSA_5, Pos. 115–118)

These observations spark a question that runs through the whole chapter: If migrant workers earn wages below subsistence and accumulate debt over time, how can they still repay their loans? Or, put differently, why don't more chronically indebted workers default?

Based on my empirical fieldwork, I would claim that the repayment of loans by women garment workers is guaranteed primarily through six interlocked strategies. The first, the sale of assets like land, gold and jewellery, was briefly explored in chapter 13, in the context of the slow violence of the agrarian crisis. The second, financial expropriation through deduction of wages and pawning future labour capacities, was discussed in the previous chapter. Likewise, the third strategy, juggling different sources and types of debt to stay solvent while living through indebtedness, was also touched upon. Therefore, this section will focus on the three remaining strategies. A fourth strategy is lengthening the workday, i.e., working on piece-rate jobs after working full-time in the factory or engaging in additional domestic work to augment meagre incomes. This point expands the notion of financial expropriation. Wages below the subsistence level force these full-time factory workers to work extra shifts to make ends meet:

> "Many of them depend on their salary [to repay loans]. […] In some places like Mysore Road, in the early morning, before going to work, they go to domestic work, some stitch cloths at home after finishing factory work. Some go to bathe the child. Some go to cook or make chapatis in the houses. Some go to market and buy flowers and they string them and send them with their children to sell in the morning. It's not just one work. They do several other jobs. Not just to repay the loan but these days rents of houses are high, cost of living is high. Wages are not enough. It's difficult to live, so they work extra. […] People do minor works like washing utensils, placing Rangoli at the door etc." (CSA_5, Pos. 121–125)

These extra shifts also demonstrate the intimate connections between the productive/reproductive and formal/informal, which are often analysed separately but are just two sides of the same coin.

A fifth means, arguably the most drastic measure, is to cut on essential household expenditures. Most of the household income is usually spent on food and rent. But since rent is fixed and hardly negotiable, reducing food intake becomes an important measure with potentially drastic health consequences in times of severe income-expenditure-mismatches. This point will be further explored in the following section when discussing garment workers' livelihoods during major crises in recent years. Reducing expenditure may also be related to working longer hours. Usually, garment workers have 14 days of leave annually. The factories offer workers a bonus of 500 rupees per month if they decide not to take leave. Taking leave for migrant workers is almost always synonymous with travelling to their native places, possibly seeing their kids and other relatives. However, the travel is expensive and usually, children and other relatives expect gifts from the homecoming workers (CSA_3, Pos. 60). Hence, not travelling home for a festival season or other occasion may reduce expenditures and possibly also enhance their meagre incomes through the paid bonus, although the psychological burden of such a strategy may be tremendous.

A sixth and final strategy that distinguishes garment from domestic and many other precarious migrant workers is accessing existing social security schemes, most notably the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) or gratuity. If workers are employed for five consecutive years, they are entitled to compensation that depends, amongst other things, on their basic salary. Therefore, many workers try to work at a factory for five years before leaving the job and taking up another one. However, there are many obstacles to working in the same factory for five consecutive years, and the turnover is extremely high due to intolerable working conditions, constant verbal or physical harassment, and pregnancy/maternal leave:

> "Let's say most of the workforce is in the age group between 20 and 30 in this industry. On average, a woman would have at least two children, and that means at least two breaks in her career. She won't work for a year or so. Then again, she comes back to work when the child is one year old or so. Or if it's really an emergency, she will leave the child in the village and come back. Again, she'll work for two or three years, and then she will receive again. In ten years, there are many cases of abortions because of the heat in the industry, high-pressure jobs, and stress. Let's say that happens. They get gratitude's after five years. It is 75 days of salaries into the basic salary. If here salary is Rs 300/day, than 300*75 is what she would get [Rs. 22,500]. For the worker, this is quite a big amount. But they tend to lose out on that. When the factories don't have to pay that, it's a benefit for the factory." (CSA_3, Pos. 42)

The turn to younger and more vulnerable migrant workers – unfamiliar with the local context, without many bonds of solidarity and housed in hostels – has also benefitted factories strategically employing women workers for only a few years, certainly below five years, to retain social contributions (Mezzadri 2017, 90). In cases of medical emergencies, garment workers can access treatment through ESI. However, in many cases, they would instead go to a private clinic after work for practical reasons:

> "The reason is that if they go to the ESI they have to take leave from work. The ESI centres are open from 10am till 5pm. It's not helping the workers in any way. The worker has to take a half-day leave if the child is sick, with normal fever, diarrhoea – so the worker thinks, "oh I have to take leave from work, and that's difficult, so let me take the child to a private physician to just get some medicines and then sends them back. But in case there is a major illness, like the worker's husband

having kidney stones, then they go to the ESI hospital, they get the check-up, they get scans and everything done" (CSA_3, Pos. 36)

Apart from the ESI and gratuity, the EPF is garment workers' most critical social security scheme. Rather than a savings mechanism for retirement, the provident fund constitutes the single most vital tool to access emergency funds and lump sums necessary for housing, healthcare emergencies, education, marriages, and the like. The fundamental role the PF plays in managing garment workers' crisis of social reproduction also explains the fierce resistance against the NDA government's reform plans announced in March 2016:

"But for a lot of workers, that's the only savings they have. And when they have to shift the house, or there's a medical emergency, or if children are admitted to school, and there's a lump sum that has to be paid – these three are the cases that workers have mentioned in the context of PF. When they said that this can become a rule in March 2016, it was a huge and almost instant fear, and a major reason for people to protest was the high level of insecurity, because that's one thing that all workers depended on. In many cases, like sexual harassment or other types of labour rights violations, workers may choose to leave the company and search for a new one. So if you quit, you can close your account and withdraw that money. And then you get a new PF in the new company" (CSA_2, Pos. 27)

In short, accessing their PF is a central reproductive finance strategy for garment workers. Since their work lives are marked by constant insecurity, super-exploitation and various forms of violence, fluctuation may express a form of silent resistance and a necessary coping mechanism that allows withdrawing the PF as an emergency buffer of last resort: "For workers, this provident fund is so important in cases of emergencies that they don't mind leaving, withdrawing the money and joining in again later." (CSA_3, Pos. 57; see also Pos. 50 – 51).

Accessing the PF is closely related to juggling debts. Reflecting on the coercive practices of MFIs, a trade union secretary suggests one must understand the PF as a mechanism that allows workers to repay loans, as a financial safety net in case of over-indebtedness:

"Many workers take many loans from Jan..... Janalakshmi, Ujjivan, Dhanlaxmi. These MFIs go only to the areas of garment workers. They go to the houses. They insist on punctual repayment on weekly-monthly basis. Even if someone has dead there, they don't listen. Repayment should be done. That type of system they have. If not paid, they fine the group. If one borrower has not paid, all have to collectively make the payment. MFIs do good business like this. Many workers go to them. Sometimes workers take a loan for high interest from house owners, neighbors, relatives and known etc. They seek loan by narrating their problems.

When the loan amount is high, they resign the job, take the PF and repay and take up [a new] job." (CSA_5, Pos. 103–107)

The quote powerfully illustrates the relational rationalities of debt, comprising how different sources of credit also imply different types of rationality and degrees of alienation, for example, insisting on repayment upon the death of a family member versus narrating one's problems to the creditors. Ultimately, however, all these different types of creditor-debtor relationships are constitutive to the household's survival. In contrast to many precarious migrant workers in the urban informal economy, Bengaluru's garment workers have a substantial financial safety net with the EPF, which is worth fighting for.

Against this background, the massive protests in mid-April 2016 are not as surprising as many suggested. The importance of PF as a reproductive finance strategy for garment workers cannot be overestimated. Reflecting on the significance of women garment workers in these strikes, a union leader suggests the fierce resistance must be understood as part of highly precarious working conditions, including low salaries, exposure to various forms of violence, high turnover in the industry, and multiple burdens connected to social reproduction:

> "The question was, why only garment workers went on strike and no other workers. The answer is the garment workers get very low salary. The life of garment workers is such that, they work for five years in one place, then they resign and take the PF and gratuity. They would have done many commitments; they fulfil all these and then again join the new job. In such a situation, how can they wait for 58 years of age to get the PF money? This is the anger which prompted them to strike." (CSA_5, Pos. 39)

As was argued before, living through reproductive debt requires juggling loans, including different temporalities and obligations associated with various types and sources of credit. In this context, the EPF becomes a vital collateral for garment workers. After all, accessing the fund establishes garment workers' creditworthiness vis-à-vis different lenders.[5] Menon and Sundar (2019, 11) describe the EPF as "a condition of social reproduction [for garment workers], both by enabling periodic rest and recovery from the harsh discipline of the factories for the workers themselves and by enabling their children's education or wedding expense".

The case of the 2016 strike against the amendment of the provident fund is intriguing because it shows how labour and debt struggles may converge in a broad

5 In contrast to what Lavinas (2018) and Torkelson (2021) discuss as collateralisation of social security in Brazil and South Africa, where profit-driven financial institutions draw on regular welfare receipts as the poor's collateral, the case of the EPF implies a more indirect form of collaterlisation, in which lump sums can be withdrawn at critical conjunctures.

sense. While primarily directed against state policy, protecting social security benefits the labour movement had fought for in the past, this protest was launched as a wildcat strike. As such, it was not organised or orchestrated by trade unions, political parties, or civil society organisations, although the latter's involvement in the sector seemed to have played an essential role in the comparatively better organisation of this segment of migrant workers. This brief episode points to the significance of reproductive finance as a necessary and widespread means to manage a structural subsistence crisis and as a potential lever for collective action.

Clearly, this defensive struggle cannot be simply turned into an offensive one. However, the investigation of migrant garment workers in Bengaluru may provide a glimpse at how India's subaltern working classes can challenge the neoliberal regime of re/productive finance. A close inspection of women workers' every day (work) not only reveals the contradictions of capital and care as fought through indebtedness. They also demonstrate the multiplicity of their struggles as (informal) labourers, challenging the idea of docile and disposable third-world factory women and, ultimately, resisting and challenging the embodied experience of capitalist, patriarchal and caste-based oppression – all lived through at the same time (Dutta 2021; Menon and Sundar 2019; RoyChowdhury 2015).

## The Intensification of An Existential Crisis of Social Reproduction

In light of the garment workers' fierce resistance against the corporate agenda of the NDA government, the Demonetisation in November 2016 almost appears like a revenge against the class struggle from below. In times of economic shocks and crises, corporations tend to pass on uncertainties and losses to their workforce:

> "With the demonetisation there were a lot of issues which became bigger for the migrant workers. Because you already have no support system. The last two or three years, one of the major challenges for workers, one, a lot of workers have been laid out of work, formally and informally, they have been told to not come to work for a few days, and that continues now. Earlier you had your work pay and you had overtime that was maybe not paid for, forced labour, there were some changes in the labour practices to get workers to add one hour to their working time each day. They tried different strategies to ensure that the minimum wage would go down, and that they could maximize the work time. But right now, it's reversed, they try to force workers on leave for a couple of days, because they don't have enough work to give to them on a daily basis." (CSA_2, Pos. 12)

These layoffs, in turn, increase the debt-distress cycle, pressuring workers to constantly search for alternative employment and manage (temporal) income gaps through indebtedness. As was mentioned before, food and rent are the most significant elements of expenditure for most precarious migrant workers. While the latter is hardly negotiable, households tend to reduce food intake during severe income-expenditure mismatches to ensure repayment. Recalling a survey in which garment workers were asked what they would cut on in case they did not have money, one of the interviewees confirms this assessment: "And some 59 per cent said it would be food. At the beginning of the month, they would buy some nice things to eat, and towards the end of the month it would just be rice and watery tomatoes gravy." (CSA_3, Pos. 29).

Such strategies are no singular event and are certainly not confined to Bengaluru. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected global supply chains, including garment exports, and apparel brands and retailers cancelled US$ 40 billion worth of orders (Anner 2022; Majumdar, Shaw, and Sinha 2020). As usual in crises, the workers at the bottom were at the receiving end of the unfolding misery. In Bengaluru, at least 65 factories closed, depriving more than 10,000 workers of a regular income. Many factories stopped providing transport, forcing migrant workers to resign or threatening workers that if they didn't leave, they would not get access to their dues (Joesph 2021). In addition, most garment factories refused to pay their workers the increased legal minimum wages, leading to an estimated US$ 58 million in wage theft for approximately 400,000 garment workers across Karnataka (Kelly 2021).[6] The forced resignations and withholding of wages intensified the social reproduction crisis that garment workers faced even before the pandemic. Since many garment workers are primary or important supplementary earners, these processes significantly reduced household income, pushing families further into distress and debt.

According to a study from the Alternative Law Forum (ALF) and the Garment Textile Workers' Union (GATWU), 47 per cent of the interviewed workers in Bengaluru said their household incomes had reduced between 30 – 50 per cent during the pandemic, and one in four reported of losses of total household income of more than 50 per cent. The vast majority did not have any savings to rely on, while half of the interviewed workers had outstanding loans and interest payments they hoped to serve with their wages. The already high burden of rent accumulated during unemployment. Devi, a former garment worker in her early 40s, said: "We haven't been able to meet our commitments after losing our job. We have migrated here, and we have had to take loans to survive" (Devi in Shivanand and Prathiba 2021, 29). With few options left to reduce their household expenditure, 80 per cent of the surveyed

6 Pressure from workers, trade unions and civil society organisations and a successful lawsuit reached that most companies commenced payments in early February 2022. However, worker's lacked this income during the most critical phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

families of garment workers had to reduce their food intake significantly, especially cutting on vegetables, meat, fruits, snacks and beverages like tea and coffee (including milk), and slashing meals to only one or two per day (CSA_2, Pos. 14, see also Kelly 2021). The female garment workers were now hungry, heavily indebted, and without steady income – but still shouldering the responsibility to take care of their families somehow. This episode vividly demonstrates the violence of reproductive debts, which is by no means limited to garment workers.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide 'Janata Curfew' [literally people's curfew] in March 2020, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers were laid off, stranded, and walking home for hundreds of kilometres. Drawing on surveys with roughly 10,000 of these migrant workers in the first month after the curfew had been in effect, the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) published a report stating that 72 per cent said their rations would finish in two days, 78 per cent had less than Rs. 300 with them, 82 per cent had not received allocations from the government. Hardly any of these workers received any cash relief from the government (SWAN 2020). Once more, the necessity of reproductive debts became apparent. The same report claimed that almost 90 per cent of the workers had taken a loan for rations or other essentials, with most borrowing between Rs. 2,000 and 5,000 (48%) and almost one-third borrowing more than Rs. 5,000. Likewise, *The State of Work Report 2021* claims that poverty has significantly increased during the pandemic, with an increase of 230 million individuals falling below the national minimum wage (APU 2021, 116ff.). More than 90 per cent of the 2,800 respondents of a survey, of whom the majority were casual women workers predominantly Dalit, Adivasi or low caste, reported that their households had suffered a reduction in food intake due to the lockdown, and most reported increased burdens of unpaid care work related to preparing food, cleaning, washing and emotional care. Moreover, in April/May 2020, households were on average indebted with twice their pre-lockdown monthly income, while for the bottom income quarter, indebtedness signified almost four times their monthly wages, in most cases to meet food, health and other daily expenditures (see Table 6).

Non- or underpayment of wages, reduced food intake, increased burdens of unpaid reproductive work, exclusion from essential (public) services, and distress-driven indebtedness are like a red thread that runs through many cross-state studies on precarious migrant workers during the lockdown (Azeez et al. 2021; Foley and Piper 2021; Mookerjee et al. 2021; Narayan 2021).

*Table 6: Income-Debt Ratios of Migrant Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

| | Overall | Bottom 25% | Second 25% | Third 25% | Top 25% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Median Income in February 2020 (Rs.) | 8,500 | 4,000 | 7,000 | 10,000 | 18,000 |
| Loan Amount (Rs.) | 18,000 | 12,000 | 15,000 | 20,000 | 30,000 |
| Ratio | 2.1 | 3.8 | 2.10 | 2 | 1.4 |

Source: APU (2021, 126).

What is perhaps distinct for garment workers in Bengaluru is the relevance of the EPF as paramount financial safety net during and after the lockdown in 2020: "Women said they resigned because they wanted to withdraw accumulated PF and gratuity to pay for children's school fees or weddings or to pay off debts built up during the lockdown, or because they did not have child-care since schools and Anganwadis [child care] were not functioning" (Shivanand and Prathiba 2021, 13). This quote reaffirms how the intensified crisis of social reproduction through, for example, closed childcare forces women to take on debt. Far from the shiny images of entrepreneurial women lifting their families out of poverty through access to credit, the latter becomes a necessary survival strategy that reinforces the distress it seeks to relieve.

By looking at three distinct moments in the lives of migrant workers, this chapter aimed to shed light on the workings of the neoliberal regime of re/productive finance beyond the shiny image of India's Silicon Valley. It was argued that the interlocking dynamics of expropriation, super-exploitation, and exclusion drive the demand for reproductive debts, entrapping migrant workers in a debt-distress cycle. This dynamic implies various forms of financial expropriation linked to the subordination of labour under (financial) capital. Caring for reproductive debts, for instance, by juggling different sources and types of credit, becomes an important survival strategy predominantly female household members engage in. In this context, the rise of commercial microfinance must be understood as filling a particular niche within an existing ecosystem of creditors. Rather than replacing other debt relations, it intersects with them, producing ambiguous and potentially devastating consequences, particularly in times of crisis. In concluding this part, the following chapter summarises the key insights, emphasising the structural violence associated with reproductive debts.