

## Focus:

Surviving the lockdown  
using social networks in  
rural South India



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# Surviving the lockdown using social networks in rural South India

How have rural populations in India mobilised their social networks in times of forced “social distancing”? The COVID-19 pandemic was expected to trigger a range of dramatic sanitary and socioeconomic consequences in India, significantly impacting on its population of 1.3 billion. The severity and brutality of the first lockdown from March 2020 until November 2020 and the paucity of pro-poor measures have been severely criticised. Some researchers and activists have denounced both the lack of compassion of the Indian government (Aiyar, 2020; Harriss, 2020), its attempts to “destroy” the informal economy of the poor (Harriss-White, 2020), a “deliberate cruelty” (Hensman, 2020), the possible resurgence of old forms of bondage and slavery (Nagaraj and Srivastava, 2020) and a “political strategy of cumulative inequality” (Breman, 2020).

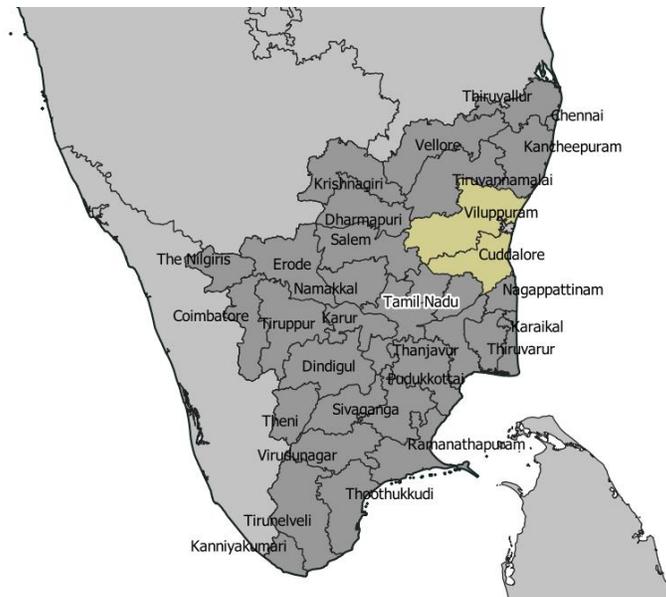
This paper, which stems from the methods and findings developed in Guérin, Mouchel and Nordman (2022, hereafter GMN), aims to analyse the effects of the first Indian lockdown on the use of interpersonal social networks in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. Benefitting from first-hand and original survey data collected from the authors in a rural region of Tamil Nadu, GMN (2022) explore the content of social networks in Tamil villages, and to what extent families have used them to cope with the lockdown. They provide a specific focus on the use of caste-based social networks.

In India, social networks are organised around social institutions such as caste, kinship, religion, gender and location (Harriss-White, 2003). Although caste is a shifting concept, perpetually evolving according to the context and political concerns, it does still have a clear meaning. Caste is a significant marker of poverty and social discrimination all over India. Low castes remain at the bottom of Indian society (Shah et al., 2018). Although kinship alliances have been radically transformed (Kapadia, 1996), they continue to shape individuals’ life trajectories and to play a key role in protection and security (De Neve, 2016).

The specific questions asked in GMN (2022) are: what have been the effects of the sanitary crisis and the main Indian lockdown on the structure of interpersonal networks in these rural areas of Tamil Nadu? To what extent have intra-caste, inter-caste and kinship relationships been used during the COVID-19 lockdown? They explore these questions using both quantitative and qualitative data on interpersonal relationships.

## Study area and data

Figure 1: Map of Tamil Nadu including the districts of Villupuram and Cuddalore



Source: Global Administrative Areas data; designed by Arnaud Natal.

The study area includes villages forming part of the Villupuram and Cuddalore districts in Tamil Nadu. The area is economically dynamic, featuring a large proportion of irrigated agriculture, two industrial towns (Neyveli and Cuddalore) and a regional business centre (Panruti). Vanniyars – qualified as middle caste – and Paraiyars – qualified as lower caste or ‘Dalits’ (formerly called ‘untouchables’) – are the two major local *jati* groups across the region. The region has seen many changes over the last three decades. Agriculture as a source of income continues to decline. Non-farm jobs are now predominant, and their share continues to grow, largely through the region’s informal economy.

The upper castes have mostly moved away from the villages to nearby towns, adopting urban jobs and lifestyles, and selling an important part of their land to Vanniyars. Overall, upper castes still have a hold on village life but are not as powerful as they used to be (Harriss, 2013). As for Dalits, although their situation has been improving (Guérin et al., 2014; Michiels, Nordman and Seetahul, 2022), inequalities persist, whether in terms of education, income or assets.

Overall, the role of caste in contemporary India remains highly controversial: has the market economy erased caste and replaced it with class? Some scholars see modernity and the reinforcement of a market economy since the 1990s as a caste-erasing process (Mosse, 2020). Tamil

Nadu, which is one of the most industrialised states of India, and well-known for the quality of its development indicators (Dhas, 2012), is a good case to examine this hypothesis.

## The structure of social networks

The qualitative material used in GMN (2022) was collected first through phone interviews during the COVID-19 lockdown and then, from December 2020, via face-to-face interviews. Quantitative data stem from a longitudinal household survey collected at three points in time: in 2010 with the RUME survey, in 2016-17 using the survey NEEMSIS 1 (Nordman et al., 2017) and in 2020-21 via the survey NEEMSIS 2 (Nordman et al., 2021; see <https://neemsis.hypotheses.org/>).

The two NEEMSIS waves (2016-17 and 2020-21) included questions about the size and the characteristics of social networks. This information was collected by means of “name generators” in different contexts (e.g. labour market, credit market, everyday interactions). They consisted of several questions to invite the respondent (i.e. the household head, Ego 1, or Ego 2) to elicit people (“Alters”) with whom they maintain certain types of direct relationships. For one and the same question, different Alters could be mentioned. GMN (2022) focus on labour-based and debt-based social networks collected through six different questions.

Social relations encompass multiple ranges of interpersonal networks that people might use in different contexts in order to gain access to different resources. A structural approach is interested in the structure of interpersonal networks as a whole; instead of being focused on the specific connections a person might have at the individual level. In this framework, the social network analysis tools include statistical indicators to define and characterise the network along with sociograms (i.e. graphs of social networks). These are particularly useful for studying the importance of intra- and inter-caste relationships in financial practices and employment through graphical representations of social network indicators. The structure of the NEEMSIS database allows the authors to draw out information on each the scope of Ego’s personal network with regard to labour and credit markets and also their composition.

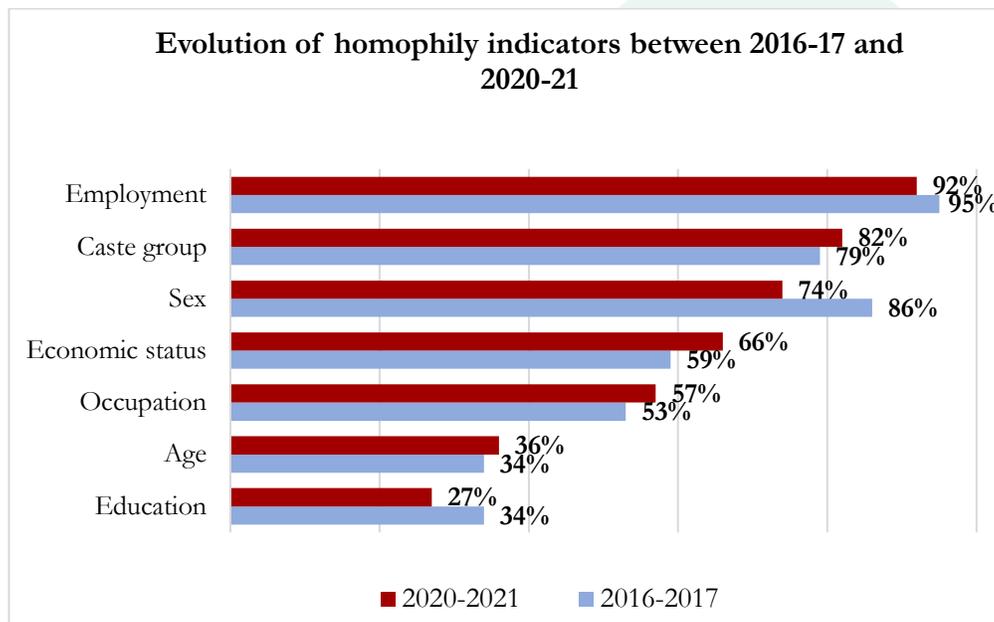
For both waves, the majority of Alters come from the middle-caste group although their corresponding Egos are drawn from the lower-caste group. In addition, Alters are slightly better educated than Egos. Furthermore, the share of wage workers is always lower for Alters than for Egos. To obtain information about job opportunities and to contract a loan, Egos are likely

to make use of Alters who are higher up in the social hierarchy, which is expressed here in terms of educational background, caste groups and employment status. Notwithstanding, this trend must be nuanced in view of extremely homophilous interpersonal relationships, as shown below.

Homophily is defined as the proportion of ego-to-alter ties sharing the same attribute among all ego-to-alter ties. This refers to the tendency of people to be in contact with people who are similar to themselves in a socially significant way.

Fig. 2 shows homophily measures for employment (e.g. whether a person is engaged in paid labour or not), caste group (i.e. the upper-, middle-, and lower-caste groups), gender, economic status (i.e. same economic condition according to Ego), occupation (i.e. farmers, self-employed or wage workers), age (i.e. 15-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, over 65 years old) and level of education (i.e. no education, primary school, upper primary, high school, senior secondary, bachelor and above).

Figure 2: Evolution of homophily indicators for each trait across all the name generators



Source: NEEMSIS 1, 2016-17 and NEEMSIS 2, 2020-21; Guérin, Mouchel, Nordman, 2022.

The proportion of similar ego-to-alter ties is the highest in the employment, gender and caste group categories for both waves. Employment status refers to whether or not the person is engaged in paid work. Figures on employment status are likely to be explained by a relatively high employment rate in the survey area; respectively 72% and 71% in 2016-17 and 2020-21 using a one-year reference period for the calculation. Caste

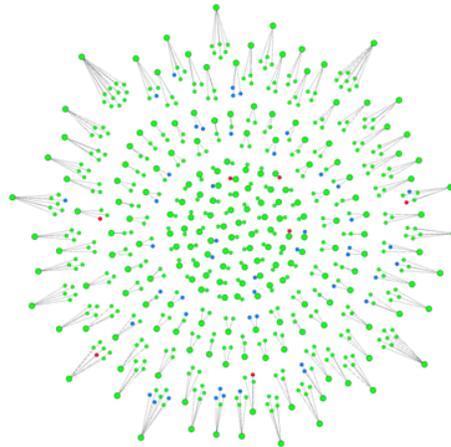
group homophily has increased slightly between 2016-17 and 2020-21. The evolution of caste homophily illustrates a general trend observed in this area of Tamil Nadu: the reinforcement of intra-caste interdependency regarding first loan-based relationships and then labour-based relationships. There is also a high degree of homophily for gender. This homophily indicator confirms that gender remains an important determinant on both labour and financial markets in rural Tamil Nadu. Using 2016-17 data, women do not have access to the same jobs or financial opportunities, and this also varies according to caste and marital status (Reboul, Guérin et Nordman, 2021).

These results confirm a strong segmentation and fragmentation of the labour and financial markets around social institutions, particularly across caste and gender. People face either restrictions or differential treatment based on caste or gender (Guérin et al., 2020). These social identities still affect the tasks most people do (Harris-White, 2003). People from the lower-caste group only interact with people from the same caste group, cumulating inequalities and discriminations (Mosse, 2020).

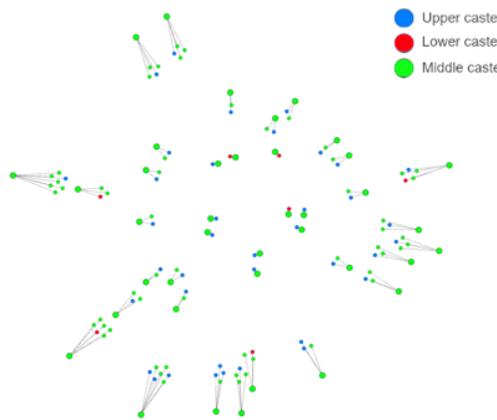
The next paragraph focuses on the debt-based interpersonal networks analysed in GMN (2022). Information on debt draws (i.e. interpersonal loans) on 477 Egos, who belong to 420 households, and who elicited 1,114 Alters in 2016-17, and on 529 Egos, who belong to 415 households, and who elicited 1,921 Alters in 2020-21. Two questions are discussed here: (i) information about the lender for business loans and (ii) information about the lender for all types of loans. For the rest of the analysis, we are not interested in institutional lenders which represent 14% and 29% of the lenders in 2016-17 and 2020-21 respectively.

Egos depend to a large extent on intra-caste lenders among all the villages of the sample. 82% of Alters are drawn from the same caste group as their Ego equivalent in 2020-21, and 76% in 2016-17. Homophily on caste group is particularly important; people tend to borrow from lenders from the same caste group. Upper-caste Egos have the most diversified money lenders. Between 2016-17 and 2020-21, 58% then 48% of their money lenders were from upper castes. This is the only caste group for whom caste group homophily has decreased between both waves. However, this diversification might be constrained by the departure of most of the upper-caste communities from the villages, in search of better opportunities in the surrounding towns or bigger cities of Tamil Nadu.

Figure 3: Graphical representations of debt-based interpersonal relationships of middle-caste Egos in 2016-17



**Figure 3a:** Graph of the whole debt network for middle caste egonets in 2016-17.



**Figure 3b:** Graph of the debt network for the heterogeneous and middle caste egonets in 2016-17.

Source: NEEMSI-1, 2016-17; Guérin, Mouchel, Nordman, 2022.

Fig. 3 shows graphical representations of the network of middle-caste Egos used for interpersonal loans in 2016-17. Each circle represents a node, either Ego or an Alter. The egonets with the smaller number of alters are in the centre of the graph. The further egonets are from the centre, the bigger the number of Alters per egonet, i.e. the bigger the number of money lenders. The ego-to-alter tie represents the loan an Ego has taken out from a lender. It emphasises the high degree of group caste homophily among middle caste borrowers. The graph is almost entirely made-up of green nodes representing either Egos or Alters from the middle caste group. Visually, this confirms the importance of intra-caste personal relationships. If we restrict the ties to heterogeneous egonets (Fig. 3b), the majority of nodes disappears. An egonet is considered to be homogeneous if all the

Alters making up the egonet are from the same caste group. A homogeneous egonet means an Ego only mentions Alters from the same caste group. We might consider that the more one's network is homogeneous across caste, the more caste is a discriminating criterion to constitute this network.

These data show the increasing importance of intra-caste loans, specifically for caste groups that are placed higher in the social hierarchy. Looking at the hierarchisation of the credit market, low castes tend to borrow more and more from low-caste money lenders. However, the middle and upper caste groups do not borrow from low castes. Simply put, one rarely borrows from anyone considered lower than oneself. No matter the degree of intra-caste or inter-caste dependency, the caste system continues to segment the credit market.

## Coping with the lockdown, the role of networks

GMN (2022) describe multiple strategies deployed by households and individuals to face the consequences of the first COVID-19 lockdown that took place between the 24th March and 1st June 2020. The lockdown affected every family, although unequally. All the households in the NEEMSIS survey dealt with a sudden loss of income due to the impossibility of working. Moreover, the lack of prospects reinforced uncertainty, i.e. how long the lockdown would last, the lack of information on the exact nature of the pandemic and the virus etc. The COVID-19 pandemic was relatively mild in the villages compared to the consequences of the lockdown. Ultimately, a very low number of known infections were reported.

In order to survive, reducing household consumption expenditure was an initial strategy, starting with food. In 2020-21, only 25% of households had access to enough food during the lockdown. A large majority (76%) experienced a decline in food quality. Not only had incomes fallen, but due to the disruption of transport networks, the cost of some foodstuffs rose. Many households were forced to eat rice porridge without side dishes on a regular basis. However, it seems that no household had suffered from starvation. The role of subsidised food, through the Public Distribution System (PDS) shops, partially compensated for the fall in income and the increase in prices. Free commodities rations, such as rice, dhal, cooking oil and sugar were distributed along with INR 1,000 in cash to all ration card holders in the state. 66% of the households consider subsidised food to be an important part of their diet during the lockdown. It is also worth noting that 89% of Egos in 2020-21 consider that the government's help was the

most effective they received during the lockdown, compared to other sources of help (e.g. family, community, and other caste groups). However, this needs to be qualified. Almost nobody benefited from the whole package announced by the central government, whether additional cash transfer or subsidised loans, shelters for homeless persons and migrants, communal kitchens to be set up to cook and distribute food to the destitute, or food to be supplied through “Amma Kitchens” and other ambitious measures.

Apart from food, other expenses were reduced: almost all social and religious rituals ceased, although slowly resuming from June onwards, while many health expenses were postponed. The moratorium on loans, imposed by the Reserve Bank of India until the end of August, was a great relief. Even informal lenders tended to align with the moratorium and did not enforce repayments for a while. Many health expenses were postponed due to the contingent pressures of the lockdown - public hospitals were inaccessible or people were afraid of being stuck at the hospital.

The lockdown was also an opportunity to put social networks to the test as a social security net and to activate solidarity ties. The use of interpersonal networks was deficient during the first stage of the lockdown, starting with a “collapse of trust”. All the testimonies collected by telephone, and described in GMN (2022), express a shared feeling of panic. The usual networks of protection were lost, leading to considerable anxiety. In this atmosphere of high uncertainty, kinship ties act as the only source of support and protection, and this applies in particular within the household unit. Different types of resources were mobilised through kin networks: (i) basic daily expenses, (ii) financial support, (iii) emotional support and (iv) information.

An example is given in GMN (2022) of a Dalit labour recruiter known for fifteen years. He had gradually built up his network of workers and creditors, and needs to regularly provide wage advances to workers in need. Over the years, he has built up an excellent reputation by regularly protecting his workers (e.g. through loans or gifts in case of illness, unforeseen events, etc.). So far, he was using four trusted creditors from diverse castes and backgrounds with whom he had gradually built relationships of trust. When the lockdown was announced, he could neither repay his creditors nor help his workers. Many of them were waiting for him in front of his house, hoping for some kind of help. He turned his phone on for only a few minutes a day. He went so far as to contemplate suicide. His

worst fear, as described in GMN (2022), was to lose his *nambikai* (reputation).

Once the first stage was over and as time went by, exchanges resumed based on caste and neighbourhood interdependency as well as solidarity. As mentioned, at the core of the analysis by GMN (2022), the region has undergone a profound transformation in social relations, which are now characterised by strong homophile and homogeneous networks between castes, including within the lower-caste group. Homophily and homogeneity reflect a greater interdependence within the caste, without prejudging mutual aid and equality in the relationship. During the lockdown, however, intra-caste interdependency translated into mutual aid, and thus solidarity. This included frequent exchanges of money, loans, job advice, and contact with employers.

GMN (2022) gives the example of Praba. She is a *kiz-maistry*, which means that she assists a labour recruiter (*maistry*), who is her brother, in the cutting of sugar cane. Due to the lockdown, the sugar mills were closed, the cane farmers decided not to harvest, and the cane cutters lost their jobs. For Praba and her brother, their network of workers is their main asset. The brother took the initiative to set up an artisanal jaggery factory, allowing the cane to be used. The farmers, who thought they would lose their production, agreed to be paid less. The workers found a job. Praba and her brother have succeeded in strengthening their network.

In a number of cases, however, government support, kinship, intra-caste and neighbourhood solidarity were not enough. As mentioned earlier, the system of agrarian interdependence and caste patronage, based on asymmetrical mutual obligations, combining protection and submission, has almost disappeared. Returning to these old forms of dependencies, from which many Dalits had tried to extricate themselves, was the only option.

## Conclusion

In different regions of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic - and subsequent lockdowns in 2020 - have exposed pre-existing fragilities such as insufficient health systems, excessive concentration of production chains, dependency upon “essential workers”, including migrant workers - all of these fragilities have suddenly become visible. Using original and first-hand data and with a focus on a rural region of Tamil Nadu, this article relies on the findings of Guérin, Mouchel and Nordman (2022) to explore how rural families coped with the 2020 lockdown by focusing on the use of social

networks. Family and kinship relationships have played a key role, especially during the early stages of the lockdown. While the shock has been a major source of uncertainty and translated into a “collapse of trust”, the family has been a decisive space of refuge and material and emotional support. Additionally, households have reduced their domestic consumption, starting with food expenses, and relying on the key safety net of subsidised food. As a third result, GMN (2022) highlight the equally key role of intra-caste networks. To some extent, although kin and caste interdependencies played a significant role, they did not prevent the resurgence of old forms of patronage.

For the poorest, current forms of protection might remain fragile. This is true of the welfare programmes provided by the State, whose redistribution efforts were notable but nevertheless remained insufficient. This is true of kin protection in the first stage of the lockdown. However, they have proved their efficiency in times of the first COVID-19 lockdown, and were repeatedly resorted to in the face of ongoing instability in rural villages in South India, either related to extreme climatic episodes, to socioeconomic and political crises, or to sudden macroeconomic shocks, such as the 2016 demonetisation (Guérin et al., 2017). Confronted with the impermanence of daily livelihoods, these forms of protection also appear as stable and tried-and-tested guarantees.

Cécile Mouchel\* and Christophe Jalil Nordman†

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\*Université Paris Cité, CESSMA and DIAL.

†DIAL, LEDa, CNRS, IRD, Université Paris-Dauphine, Université PSL, 75016 Paris, France.