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***Title***

The political economy of labour regulation in India – the case of the Tiruppur garment cluster

***Panel***

Reconstructing labour

***Author***

Karin Astrid Siegmann

***Contact details***

Karin Astrid Siegmann

Senior Lecturer, Labour and Gender Economics

International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS)

Kortenaerkade 12

2518 AX The Hague, The Netherlands

Phone: +31-70 4260 473

Fax: +31-70 4260 799

E-mail: siegmann@iss.nl

***Abstract***

The textile and apparel industry has been considered a crucial sector for economic development, largely due to its ability to create employment for low skilled workers, including a high share of women. In India, the textile and apparel industry represents 18 per cent of industrial employment and is estimated to contribute 4 per cent to the country’s GDP. It is the largest employer after agriculture, employing 35 million workers directly, and another 53 million indirectly in allied activities (Tewari and Nathan 2012: 13). The high share of informal employment is a salient feature of the industry.

The Indian government has shaped the textile and apparel sectors, including their size, location and scale, through a set of licensing, reservation policies as well as control of exports and imports until the 1980s (Frederick and Staritz 2011: 2). In recent years, governance of the garment industry, especially of labour conditions, has moved its emphasis from legislation to private governance driven by labour activists’ protests against poor working conditions and implemented by international buyers and brands or their associations (Tewari and Nathan 2012: 27).

This paper asks the question how industrialization patterns in India have shaped the regulation of labour and the resulting spaces for collective and individual labour agency? In order to answer this question, it focuses on the Tiruppur garment cluster in Tamil Nadu. In 2009, the cluster’s turnover was highest of all 19 Indian garment clusters and it accounted for a fifth of India’s garment exports (Carswell and de Neve 2012: 4, Tewari and Nathan 2012: 16-22). A Polanyian perspective is being taken in the analysis, investigating processes of labour commodification and their counter-movements. Special attention is being paid to the question who the agents of labour

decommodification have been and how effective their efforts have been for different groups of workers.