Aims

In a context of rapid socio-economic development in India, the Observatory of Rural Dynamics and Inequalities in South India (ODRIIS) aims to analyse how structural changes in rural South India reshape labour organisation, social hierarchies and household livelihoods. South India is characterised by contrasting dynamics: rapid economic growth, a boom in the consumer credit market, strong claims of Dalit movements, persistence and even reinforcement of gender inequalities. These contrasting dynamics makes it a privileged place for analysing socio-economic and political change and its contrasting consequences in terms of inequalities.

This Observatory promotes a multidisciplinary approach of these rural dynamics and inequalities to follow social, economic and political dynamics in the long run: reconfiguration of social structures including caste, class, gender, labour, skills, migration, financial services, debt and wealth in rural India. The Observatory is housed by the research programme “Household, vulnerabilities, labour, socioeconomic dynamics” in the Social Sciences Department of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP).

The Observatory is organised around three research themes:

1. “Agriculture and ecology”. The aim is to understand the interaction between agricultural practices, land ownership, and climate change to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these factors are interconnected and how they collectively influence agricultural sustainability and resilience in the face of climate change. One aspect to explore is how different agricultural practices, such as traditional farming methods versus modern industrial agriculture, impact land ownership patterns. Additionally, investigating the effects of climate change on agricultural practices and land ownership is vital. Climate change can result in unpredictable weather
patterns, including droughts, floods, and extreme temperatures, which directly affect crop yields and livestock productivity. These changes may exacerbate existing land ownership inequalities and threaten the livelihoods of vulnerable farming communities.

2. “Labour, migration and knowledge”. The objective is to understand the social structure, institutions and norms that affect individual labour, migration and access to various forms of knowledge, often by constraining them. This theme explores in particular how the formation of skills, cognition and interpersonal networks, those defined at the community and individual levels, influence the characteristics of individuals’ and family’s trajectories in terms of social status, employment and migration. This theme articulate here various (sometimes disjoint) disciplinary approaches: on the one hand, development, labour and behavioural economics; on the other hand, sociological and anthropological structuralist approaches. This theme hence seeks to a better understanding of the complex interactions between mobilities (social and spatial), networks (community, formal and informal ties), social identity (gender, caste), hierarchical organisation and traditional institutions and knowledge.

3. “Money, debt and finance”. The objective is to understand the complexity and diversity of financial and monetary practices in various communities, in terms of juggling and calculation frameworks, as well as the social regulation of money, finance and debt in relation to various institutions such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, space and its cultural variation. It is also about understand the emergence of household over-indebtedness, the renewal of bondage relationships, the ambiguity of microfinance and financial inclusion programs and the emergence of innovative forms of solidarities and political mobilisation.

The scope of the **Observatory** may be extended to include other research activities within the IFP that touch upon the topics described above.

**A brief history**

The **Observatory** is born from the crossroads of two interdependent social sciences programmes:

- “Labour, finances and social dynamics”, coordinated by Isabelle GUÉRIN between since 2003, focusing on financial practices and debt bondage in South India.

- “Labour, skills, social networks and mobility in India”, coordinated by Christophe Jalil NORDMAN since 2016, analysing the link between labour, skills, social and spatial migration dynamics as well as social networks formation in India.

These two programmes were both supported by the French National Research Center for Sustainable Development, and were interrelated through, first, share data collection tools in South India (like NEEMSIS – **Network, Employment, dEbt, Mobility and Skills in South India Survey**) and, second, a combination of qualitative and quantitative socio-economic methods of analysis.
Methods and objectives

- Accumulate knowledge over time through longitudinal data collection in various locations in rural and peri-urban South India.

- Share quantitative data and data collection tools (survey and technical manuals, survey questionnaires) and to stimulate other possible forms of qualitative knowledge sharing (like audiovisual documentaries for instance).

- Follow strict ethical and accountability guidelines.

- Feed academic debates and policy making through the publication of regular scientific reports and wider audience publications.

- Train social science students in research, through research.

Sharing data, knowledge and method tools

The Observatory combines various forms of data and knowledge such as: quantitative longitudinal –panel– datasets at household and individual levels, including social interpersonal network information, migration and skills assessment surveys; qualitative data such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, life histories; village monographs, organisation monographs, monographs of value chains, agrarian and environmental diagnoses; mixed data such as ethnographic financial diaries; visual data such as photographs, geographical maps and scientific video documentaries.

Some of these data and knowledge can and should be shared as public goods. This in turn requires the sharing of data collection tools and the context and conditions of data and knowledge production.

The data and knowledge supports are made public after a certain period of time to allow the researchers and students involved in the collection to value their own work.

Quantitative data are anonymised and made public in several forms: raw data (accompanied by a user manual), descriptive statistics (data report), as is already the case for the RUME (Rural Microfinance and Employment) and NEEMSIS.

The sharing of qualitative data and other forms of knowledge accumulation should follow rules adapted on a case-by-case basis to respect the anonymity of individuals and organisations.

Some data cannot be shared when they touch on sensitive areas. In such cases, the concerned members of the Observatory should find other means of knowledge sharing, through for instance dedicated seminars, training sessions for students and young researchers, regular observatory reports.

Some methods do not lend themselves to sharing (e.g. the ethnographic method: the data collected may not be an “information” (i.e. an abstracted representation) but rather a field “experience”, considered as a concrete and intersubjective process that can hardly been shared. Again, other forms of knowledge diffusion may be imagined in such circumstances.
A multi-site perspective

The Observatory combines:

- repeated data collection or observations over time (i.e. longitudinal) of villages, populations or groups of populations (for instance a specific category of workers), organisations;
- a multi-site approach (for instance the follow up of seasonal migrants from their origin places to their workplaces or permanent migrants in their new destinations; tracking of global financial flows);
- a continuous analysis of inter-linkages with urban and peri-urban areas. The Observatory is not restricted to specific locations. It is intended to extend to different locations in South India for comparative purposes with the initial locations or to start new themes that need to be investigated.

Ethics and accountability

All forms of research must follow ethical rules: informed consent, do-no-harm principle, provision of specifically considered protection for vulnerable populations, risk analysis and responsive monitoring, for instance. This is even more the case when the data collection and accumulated knowledge are envisaged repeatedly in the same places and with the same populations. Beyond these basic rules, the Observatory follows the following rules:

- coordination of field visits in order to avoid saturation of the populations and places of investigations (village areas);
- adapting questionnaires to local contexts in order to limit the risks of symbolic violence inherent in any form of data collection;
- construction of reciprocal relationships. In the case of quantitative data collection, after a period of survey, this may take the form of a formal knowledge restitution to the local populations through the organisation of presentations by researchers of first computed data, which should be then specifically tailored to the perceived and actual interests of the local population.

Beyond the ethical rules, the Observatory is accountable to several stakeholders (villagers, local and regional officials and administrations, civil society). As a consequence, the researchers are committed to sharing some of their results in appropriate formats and places: for example, oral format in village neighborhoods and administrative offices; written format in the form of policy briefs, popularisation articles in the media; visual format in the form of photos, documentaries, artwork.
Interdisciplinarity, pluridisciplinarity and evidence making

The Observatory is based on a plurality of methods, disciplines and modes of evidence. Pluralism is considered as the only way to make the complexity of the world more intelligible and understandable.

The Observatory is constantly reflecting on how to implement, in practice, multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. Basic conditions include the sharing of a common epistemology, the non-hierarchy of disciplines, specialties, methods and mutual respect, and the involvement of researchers in data collection and not only remote supervision.

Commitments of the ODRIIS’s researchers

- Refer to the Observatory in any written or oral communication.
- When using the shared data, cite the data report and survey manuals that are made available on the Observatory website.
- All researchers involved in the data collection can appear as co-authors of scientific publications using the Observatory data (either quantitative or qualitative), if they wish. Implicit co-signatures should be stimulated, i.e. be the rule rather than the exception.
- Share own data, data collection methods, tools and instruments, and stimulate effectively other forms of sharing when the accumulated knowledge and tools are not materially sharable.
- Each researcher of the Observatory should commit to follow the ethical and accountability rules described above.
- Follow the Government protocol in conducting field work based on the Observatory data.

People

The names of the coordinators, board members, and team are available on the website.¹

Coordinators

The Observatory is overseen by permanent members called coordinators who are responsible for determining the direction of the Observatory, ensuring its proper implementation, as well as coordinating research activities.

¹https://odriis.hypotheses.org/people
Advisory Board

The Advisory Board is composed of several experts, independent and external to the management, who advise the coordinators on the proper management of the Observatory and its scientific orientation. Publications by the members of the Observatory do not commit the members of the Advisory Board. Advisory Board members sign up for three years and may be reappointed. Members of the Advisory Board filled in a statement of support for the Observatory of Rural Dynamics and Inequalities in South India available on the website. They meet annually, and the annual meeting minutes are available in the annual report or directly on the website.

Team

The Observatory involves scholars and non-scholars from a wide range of Social Science disciplines (economics, sociology, anthropology) and institutions. Their information is available on the Observatory's website.

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