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Rural Tamil Nadu in the Liberalisation Era: What Do We Learn from Village Studies?

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Introduction: A 'Post-Agrarian State'

The Tamil Nadu state in India has a long and rich tradition of village studies of rural society and economy, undertaken by economists and anthropologists, in addition to the 'Slater village'

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studies. In this paper, we aim to survey the findings of village studies that have been accomplished over the last two decades – the era of economic liberalisation in India – together with those of larger-scale surveys in which households have been studied in a sample of villages from across a small region. A few of the studies involve re-surveys of villages, and there is one case in which the researchers report on a panel study, over a 25-year period, of upwards of 200 households spread across six villages. The studies are quite strongly biased, in terms of their geographical distribution, to the northern, central and western parts of the state, and there is a relative dearth of material from the southern districts. While we do not intend to generalise, we cannot avoid commenting upon clear commonalities in the findings of the various studies. In general, it seems to us that they tend to support the view that we advanced in our re-study of the Slater village of Gangaikondan in the south of the state (outside the city of Tirunelveli), when we suggested that rural society in Tamil Nadu is in a sense ‘post-agrarian’ (see Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj 2012). This might be expected in what is India’s most highly urbanised state. The share of the state’s population classified as ‘urban’ in 2011 was 48.45 per cent, and some projections have suggested that the state will be as much as 75 per cent urban by 2026. Several of the recent village studies reviewed in this paper report rates of population growth lower than the natural rate of growth of population in rural Tamil Nadu, and they supply abundant evidence of migration, often to towns and cities.

The term ‘post-agrarian’ reflects the general observations that the importance of agriculture in rural livelihoods has declined and that, as in Gangaikondan, far fewer village households than before can sensibly be described as those of ‘peasants’ (or as those of agricultural petty commodity producers). The diversification of employment, often involving extensive commuting from villages, and resort to migration, both circular and long-term, to towns and cities (as well, in some cases, as to other rural sites – such as in the case of the many people from villages around Villupuram who migrate for long periods for sugar-cane cutting) means, too, that the category of ‘rural’ or ‘agrarian labour’ now has little meaning. In rural Tamil Nadu we find, in the terminology suggested by Henry Bernstein and, following him, by Jens Lerche (2010), ‘classes of labour’, rather than peasant classes. As Bernstein puts it: ‘Classes of labour in the conditions of today’s “South” have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive – and typically increasingly scarce – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure “informal sector” (“survival”) activity, including farming; in effect,

various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment.’ As we said in our study of the Slater village of Iruvelpattu, this description fits very well ‘the increasingly complex, highly diversified ways in which the very mobile people (of this village) secure their livelihoods across a geographically wide range of locations’ (this and the preceding quote, Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj (hereafter HJN) 2010: 61). The other village studies that we review here point to the same conclusion. The idea that Tamil rural society is ‘post-agrarian’ also reflects our view that though Tamil Nadu can no longer adequately be analysed through the categories of peasant studies, the state has still not experienced the full structural transformation of its economy and society. ‘Post-agrarian’ is intended to indicate a kind of a transitional state of affairs, though one in which the direction of movement is uncertain.

In what follows we review evidence in particular from an as yet unpublished study by N Arivukkarasi and K Nagaraj of agrarian change in three villages of northern Tamil Nadu that have been the subjects of previous studies by several researchers over the last four decades – in the early 1970s, the early 1980s, the early 1990s and most recently (by Arivukkarasi and Nagaraj – henceforward referred to as A&N) in 2009. A&N take the exhaustive set of studies of these three and of other villages in the old North Arcot District from the early 1990s, edited by Barbara Harriss-White and S Janakarajan (2004), as a starting point. We also examine the findings of Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg and their colleagues on trends of agrarian change and social mobility in the region of Tiruchirapalli over the period 1979 to 2004 (Djurfeldt *et al* 2008), and consider the observations of Grace Carswell and of Judith Heyer from village studies in the dynamic, industrialising region of Tiruppur, in the west of the state (Carswell 2013; Heyer 2000a, 2000b, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), and those of Isabelle Guerin and her colleagues from Villupuram and Cuddalore Districts (Guerin *et al*, mss). We also refer to our own findings from detailed surveys in the two ‘Slater villages’ of Iruvelpattu and Gangaikondan, together with our notes from visits to two others of the ‘Slater villages’, Pallakurichi (in Nagapattinam District), where Jeyaranjan undertook research on agricultural labour relations in 2000, and Dusi (in Tiruvannamalai District), which we visited together early in 2014. We consider, too, findings from a study of Rural Non-Farm Employment in the state, carried out by Jeyaranjan for the Planning Commission in 2012, in which surveys were conducted in 12 villages spread across four districts in the southern half of the state, two of them (Tirunelveli and Virudunagar) with a high incidence of rural non-farm employment, according to the Census 2001, and two of them

(Thanjavur and Pudukottai) with such a low incidence.² Finally we review some recent village studies of the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Tamil Nadu.

The study by Guerin and her colleagues richly demonstrates the value of studying a number of villages from across a small region. This has led them to recognise the spatial fragmentation of labour, because location – in spite of the relatively high quality transport infrastructure of Tamil Nadu, and improved information circulation given, not least, the ubiquity of the cell phone – still remains a barrier. They distinguish three categories of settlements in their study area: (i) ‘migrant settlements’, with specialised channels of seasonal migration for brick moulding or sugar cane harvesting, and which may be more or less deserted for many months at a time; (ii) ‘semi-agrarian settlements’, located in ‘wet’ areas (irrigated tracts) ‘with wide scale agriculture and where there is a high level of caste interdependence’ (Guerin *et al*, *mss*), though here, too, even the bigger landowners ‘increasingly combine agricultural and non-agricultural incomes’ (*ibid*); (iii) ‘peri-urban settlements’ from which ‘most men come and go to nearby towns’ (*ibid*). The authors show that there are diverse patterns of identities, social hierarchies and social and spatial mobility shaped by these different sorts of locations. The point is important and forcefully reminds us that there are different sorts of villages – though, of course, the particular typology that these authors have developed is not necessarily of general applicability. Amongst the Slater villages, both Gangaikondan and Dusi, do fit the ‘peri-urban’ category very well; but Iruvelpattu combines elements of all three settlement types.

All the studies we refer to also have their own particular foci, and they are not easily compared. But a feature that they do have in common – one that is in line with our suggestion that Tamil Nadu is now ‘post-agrarian’ – is that few of these recent studies are much concerned with what is going on in agriculture, in sharp contrast with those of Harriss-White and Janakarajan. These two writers, however, in a summary article, also said that ‘to analyse the technologies and social relations of the agricultural sector alone risks an increasingly incomplete and arbitrary account of

² We have studied, as well, unpublished resurveys of a number of villages in the state carried out under Jeyaranjan’s direction in 2000 as part of the Kerala Research Programme on Local Development, of the Centre for Development Studies in Tiruvananthapuram; and an unpublished resurvey by R Rukmani of the village of Arkavadi in Villupuram District. This is a village first taken up for study with the Census of 1961 and resurveyed in 2000. Considerations of space made us refer very little to these surveys in the text, though they provide further evidence that substantiates key points that we make.

the region's development' (1997: 1471). In this context, class analysis may have to take account not only of class relations of the village but also of how rural and urban class relations interlock.³

Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods

Harriss-White and Janakarajan sum up on the state of the agricultural economy of their region of northern Tamil Nadu, from their comparison of findings in 1993-4 with those of the studies carried out over the previous two decades, as follows:

Despite the developmental effort put into agriculture, before, during and since the first generation green revolution, the impact on yields is hardly to be observed, and agricultural production remains extremely vulnerable to its physical environment and its trend is flat (1997: 1473).

Though these remarks refer specifically to the region of the small town of Arni, the picture that they suggest is a fair representation of the state of agriculture across the state as a whole. From about the time of their study Tamil Nadu – which stands out amongst the major states as one in which the irrigation potential has been more or less fully realised (see, for example, *Tamil Nadu Economic Appraisal* (Tamil Nadu) for 2002-03) – shared in the stagnation of the agricultural economy of the country as a whole. One marker of this is that yields of paddy – the most important crop in the state – in 2001-02 averaged only 3196 kg/ha⁴ (and in the following year, in circumstances of prolonged drought, they fell to 2359 kg/ha). More recently, over the period of the 11th Five-Year Plan, when agricultural growth over the country as a whole took off again, Tamil Nadu's agriculture continued to stagnate. The index of all agricultural production showed no improvement at all in the period from 2007-08 to 2010-11; the yield and production of paddy 'experienced a negative growth of 2.35 per cent and 2.26 per cent respectively'; and all food

³ This is a point that was made strongly by Gerry and Janine Rodgers in the course of their presentation, and subsequent discussions, at the Foundation for Agrarian Studies Tenth Anniversary Conference on Agrarian Issues, Kochi, 9-12 January 2014

⁴ This figure is more or less exactly the same as that recorded for the region they studied in northern Tamil Nadu by Harriss-White and Janakarajan in 1993-94.

grains negative growth of 1.40 and 1.49 per cent, respectively, for yield and production (*TNEA* 2010-11: 39). The most recent *Economic Appraisal* (for 2010-11) concludes:

The performance of the agricultural sector is hobbled by a number of vulnerabilities such as dwindling supply of irrigation water, over exploitation of groundwater, climate changes and ozone depletion, fickleness of weather, swelling population, subsistence farming, indebtedness of farmers, lack of remunerative prices for farm produce, inadequate development of post-harvest technologies, feminisation of poverty, seasonal variability, etc.

Plus ca change. Much the same conclusions appear in earlier *Economic Appraisals*, as they did in Harriss-White and Janakarajan's study from 20 years ago.

The context of the rural economy of Tamil Nadu in the liberalisation era is, therefore, one of a more or less moribund agriculture.⁵ We noted in our study of the Slater village of Iruvelpattu that the same paddy varieties were being cultivated as in 1981, and we argued that this 'suggests that the wave of innovation of paddy varieties of the 1970s and 1980s...has passed. Reported yields, too, show little if any increase over 1981' (HJN 2010: 52). The decline of the agricultural economy of Gangaikondan, where the net sown area has fallen sharply, is very clear (HJN 2012) – as it is also in Dusi. There, proximity to the Dusi-Mamandur tank, one of the largest in the state, has not protected cultivation from the vagaries of rainfall – because the tank no longer receives as much water as it did from the Palar River. The channels from the tank that supplied water to 20 villages have become silted up – an eloquent marker of the neglect of agriculture. In both Gangaikondan and Dusi (and in some others of the villages about which we have studies) there have been extensive sales of farm land for real estate.

Judith Heyer reports on the changing position of the elite cultivators ('thottam farmers', as she calls them – cultivators, that is, of large-enough areas of land irrigated by wells as to justify employing permanent labour) in villages in Coimbatore District in the west of the state – the district with the most highly commercialised agriculture in Tamil Nadu – over the period 1981-82 to 1996:

⁵ This remark may underestimate modest improvement in some parts of the state in crops other than food grains.

In 1981-82, agriculture was doing well and thottam farmers looked forward to a bright future despite indications of problems ahead. They were a confident group, powerful in their own local domain [even if they were small operators in the regional economy] ... By 1996 this had changed. Agriculture had declined, and urban and industrial development was having more influence particularly on labour and on labour costs. In 1996, many thottam farmers had sunk capital into a failing agriculture, and faced a difficult future, without the resources to move into alternatives, not well placed to take advantage of alternative opportunities (Heyer 2000a: 1) Heyer shows how these historically powerful farmers were investing in their sons in such a way as to make it possible for them to do well in areas outside agriculture. When she resurveyed the villages in 2008-09, she found that the area cultivated by the dominant landholders from the Gounder community had further declined, and that though Gounders had continued to invest in land, they were now investing more substantially in non-agricultural activities. They had begun, though modestly, to take greater advantage of alternative opportunities, outside agriculture.⁶

While Djurfeldt and his co-authors do not provide directly comparable information, they do say that real farm incomes increased over the period from 1979 to 2005, though much less than did total incomes: ‘the overall increase of 42 per cent...implies a modest growth rate of less than 1.5 per cent per year over the period’ (Djurfeldt *et al.* 2008: 56). This, they say, ‘appears to have been a respectable rate of growth of farm income’; and they believe that ‘agricultural growth may have contributed about as much as local industrialisation to growth of real incomes and thus to poverty alleviation’ (*ibid*: 50). But the published paper supplies too little information about cropping patterns and productivity for it to be clear that the agricultural economy in the region of Tiruchirapalli that they studied bucked the trends of agricultural growth and productivity found across the state as a whole.

In the circumstances of the stagnating agricultural economy of the state, it is not at all surprising that there should be evidence from village studies of the declining importance of agricultural activity as the base of livelihoods. Non-agricultural activity in rural areas is increasingly

⁶ Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu – though not in Heyer’s villages - there are reports of men from dominant land-owning, farming communities finding it increasingly difficult to find brides (Sharada Srinivasan, personal communication).

significant, as is seasonal migration, and there is abundant evidence of pluriactivity (see Carswell and De Neve 2014). Jeyaranjan's studies of rural non-farm activity from villages in four districts showed that only 28 per cent of households remained engaged only in agriculture, and that 58 per cent of those in the labour force were working in non-agricultural occupations.

Varying combinations of 'push' and 'pull' factors account for these trends. In the region of Tiruppur, the decline of agriculture is evidently compensated by the industrial development that has taken place and which has set up relatively attractive opportunities outside agriculture for some (much less so for Dalits and for women – Heyer 2013, 2014b⁷). Elsewhere, as in Dusi, the decline of agriculture has pushed cultivators (there the numerous but historically low-ranked Vanniyars, few of whom are more than small cultivators) into activities such as construction labour, and work in catering for marriages. Djurfeldt and his co-authors say that 'almost all growth in population has occurred outside the agrarian sector', and they think that that 'in a foreseeable future, the agrarian population will be down to half the total population' (2008: 52-3) – as it is already in other villages where studies were conducted. They report from their analysis of generational transfer that there has been a net exit from farming (as seems to have been the case in both Carswell's and Heyer's villages, too). They hypothesise that there has been a movement out of agriculture on the parts both of 'underdogs' – primarily the agricultural labourers – because they have been 'more prone to seize new opportunities in the non-agrarian sector than the landed and middling households' (2008: 53), and of the 'top dogs'.⁸ The top strata of the villages, these authors argue:

...tend to exit agriculture, in part due to the constraints on profitability and the scarcity and 'high cost' of labour (high only in relation to an earlier situation where they could exploit labour at their will and not in terms of any notion of a decent wage) and the increasing difficulties of extracting rent. Perhaps equally or more important is the fact

⁷ Jeyaranjan's rural non-farm study reaches the same conclusion: rural non-farm activity employs men rather than women, and members of Scheduled Castes less than others.

⁸ Heyer points out (personal communication) that in the Coimbatore/Tiruppur villages she has studied, through the 1990s – against what Djurfeldt *et al* have suggested - smaller farmers moved out of agriculture more significantly than either the large farmers or the landless labourers, and that this has changed only slowly, as the larger farmers' investments in their sons' education have started to take effect.

that they may be simultaneously attracted by growing opportunities in the non-agricultural sector. (Djurfeldt *et al* 2008: 53).⁹

In the villages they studied around Villupuram and Cuddalore, Guerin and her colleagues report that only a little over 12 per cent of all households ‘live off agriculture alone’ – presumably meaning that only a small proportion of village households now depends entirely on cultivation. In the ‘peri-urban’ village of Gangaikondan, we found that only in about 20 per cent of households was agriculture the principal source of livelihoods – though even in this village, agriculture remained the single most important activity. In her two villages in the industrialising belt of Tiruppur, Grace Carswell found that in one of them around 45 per cent of households depended primarily upon cultivation or on agricultural labour, and in the other, now primarily a power loom village, just 22 per cent (Carswell 2013: 329); Heyer found in her two villages in the same region that households whose primary source of income was agriculture declined from 77 per cent in 1981-82 to 64 per cent in 1996 and 54 per cent in 2008-9 (Heyer 2014a: 143). There is a great deal of variation, of course, between locations. In Iruvelpattu, we found that while the proportion of village households depending largely on agricultural activities had certainly declined, such households still accounted for about 60 per cent of the total; while A&N report from the three villages they studied that ‘the farm sector continues to be the predominant source of employment’ (2009, *mss*) and that cultivators and agricultural labour together accounted for upwards of 60 per cent of workers in both 1993 and 2009 – though over this period the share of cultivators has declined and that of agricultural labourers increased (even in the peri-urban village of Nesal).

Our conclusion from our study of Iruvelpattu that there is a ‘continuing dependence of a majority of households on agriculture in spite of the significant diversification of employment that has taken place, and of apparent stagnation in the agricultural economy...’ (HJN 2010: 48) most certainly cannot be generalised, but it surely is likely to be true of a great many villages outside industrialising belts like Tiruppur and peri-urban locations. Guerin and her co-authors make the very good point, too, that ‘the rise of non-farm labour does not necessarily translate into a willingness to abandon agriculture [altogether]’ (Guerin *et al.*, *mss*), for cultural and for status

⁹ The idea that there is a movement right out of agriculture on the part of the ‘top dogs’ – presumably meaning the largest landowners – did not, however, gain convincing statistical support in the study, probably because of the ‘scant statistical basis’ (Djurfeldt *et al.* 2008: 59-60)

reasons. Matters of identity are involved: ‘For Dalits and middle castes, land and agriculture continue to play a central role, both in terms of occupation – money from non-farm labour is partly invested in the land – and in terms of identity. Being a landowner with access to water is still a strong factor of distinction. Most caste conflicts between Dalits and middle castes [in the region of study principally Vanniyars] concern in large part land issues’ (*ibid*). Carswell (personal communication) reports some variation between Gounder landowners in her Tiruppur villages, with some hiring out their land in order to concentrate on their power looms or on businesses in Tiruppur, while others with business interests in town ‘spend their Sundays going back to the tottam to check up on things’. S Iyyampillai, however, in a study of two villages in the former Thanjavur district, in the Kaveri delta, goes so far as to argue that there is a process of ‘economic sanskritisation’ under way: ‘While the less privileged have started acquiring lands...the rich ones show signs of shift away from agriculture and eventually merge with urban economy...the poor try to ape the erstwhile rich class, while the latter switch over to the new and more remunerative non-farm sector’ (*mss*, 2000).

Agricultural Labour

In this context, what has been happening, specifically, with regard to agricultural labour? While the village studies show a great deal of variation between villages and between different groups in the same village, even amongst Dalits, there are some trends that are widely though not invariably observed (and across much of the country, not just in Tamil Nadu). Agricultural labour seems often to have become more than ever dominated by Dalits, probably because they are often excluded from especially the better rewarded non-agricultural labouring jobs. But there is considerable variation between Dalit groups - as between the lower-ranked Matharis, who are still much more heavily dependent upon agricultural wage work, and ‘Adi-Dravidas’ (higher ranking Scheduled Castes) in Carswell’s Tiruppur villages. Agricultural labour has also often become increasingly the province of women, for whom other opportunities are much more restricted than they are for men. The incidence of permanently attached labour in agriculture is very much lower than it was, and in many cases has disappeared – though relations of neo-bondage may be found outside agriculture, as for example amongst power loom workers in the

Tiruppur villages, where attached labour in agriculture has largely disappeared (Carswell and De Neve 2013). There is an increasing incidence of contract labour in cultivation, which has advantages for employers and for some workers, too (see Carswell 2013: 330-31; Heyer 2013).

With specific reference to Tamil Nadu there appear to be other trends as well. There is what cultivators refer to as a ‘labour shortage’ in agriculture, reflected in the tendency for real wages in agriculture to have increased, because of the availability of other employment opportunities, and perhaps, latterly, because of MGNREGA; and in the unwillingness of labourers to accept the conditions of agricultural employment that once prevailed, when they were at the beck-and-call of landowners. ‘Labour shortage’ is also associated with widespread mechanisation, of tillage, harvesting, threshing and even of weeding, in paddy cultivation (see HJN 2010, 2012). At the same time, there are quite frequent reports of the number of days of work in agriculture per labourer as having declined. This, presumably, is because of the increasing availability of non-agricultural work opportunities, which are generally preferred. As Carswell reports from her Tiruppur villages, agricultural work is generally thought to be the least attractive option – even work in power looms, which is pretty gruelling, may be considered to be a step-up from agriculture. Non-agricultural work is found attractive not only in terms of wages, but also because of its cultural significance. It means greater ‘sophistication’ - especially in the case of jobs in the garments industry of Tiruppur, but in other activities too. In Dusi, Vanniyar girls working in a shoe factory in a nearly industrial estate, though their jobs are insecure, find prestige in wearing a uniform and doing ‘company work’.

We briefly review key findings from the various studies which bear out these general points. The peri-urban village of Gangaikondan has an exceptionally small share of workers whose primary occupation is agricultural labour (a little over eight per cent) – and in this case they are *not* disproportionately Dalit (unusually, because of the success of the Pallars, the principal Scheduled Caste group of this part of Tamil Nadu, in gaining both land and education). In Iruvelpattu, the share of households who report their primary source of livelihood as agricultural labour is now down to a quarter of the total. The absolute numbers of those whose primary occupation this is are only a few more than they were in the village as long ago as 1937. In this case, almost 70 per cent of agricultural labour households are Dalit (though now only 50 per cent of all Dalit households are so dependent – a considerable reduction from what obtained in the past). Heyer

reports from her Tiruppur villages a decline in the proportion of households depending on agricultural labour from 43 per cent in 1981-82 to 36 per cent in 2008-9 (2014a: 144, 147) – with the decline having been much less among Dalits. She finds significant improvements in real wages (2012: 100). In both Gangaikondan and Iruvelpattu, we advanced evidence of increased real wages in agriculture though the number of days of agricultural employment per worker has declined, especially for men, given the mechanisation of most farm operations.

Djurfeldt and his co authors find that over the 25-year period they have studied in their sample of Tiruchirapalli villages ‘average households have increased their allocation of household labourers to non-farm activities by more than 100 per cent’ (2008: 53). They, too, find that the average number of days of employment in agriculture has generally gone down, except for men in the ‘dry’ villages they studied, where the decline of the total labour force has brought about an increase in employment for those men who continue to work as agricultural labourers (though the total number of days is still only 91, on average, through the year). Unsurprisingly, agricultural labour incomes have stagnated, especially in the wet/irrigated villages, though we may infer from their account that real wages have increased, as they have elsewhere.

Guerin and her co-authors find that ‘non-farm employment is now a fundamental part of rural household income while being a male preserve, agricultural labour being in large part female’ (2013, *mss*), and Carswell’s findings are very much the same. She, too, says that ‘most coolie workers were women’ (2013: 335). Unusually, Heyer finds in her Tiruppur villages that agricultural labour, though heavily the province of Dalits, has become increasingly male in its composition. Here, too, women find little opportunity for employment outside agriculture, but have rather withdrawn from the labour force altogether – as in Thanjavur. (Jeyaranjan 2011).¹⁰ A&N find in the three villages of their study that 85 per cent of women workers are still in the farm sector and that this proportion has registered a marginal increase over time. The loss of employment in silk weaving in these villages (as also in Dusi, which is no longer the weaving village that it had become by 1983) has apparently thrown women workers back into the farm sector. The villages studied by A&N are exceptional, amongst the village studies we are reviewing here, in that in them it seems that the share of agricultural labour in all employment has been increasing, even if only to a small extent, because of the decline of owner-cultivation

¹⁰ Heyer argues that this is a clear sign of increasing well-being in Dalit households.

and of employment, both in the livestock sector and in silk-weaving. But it is still the case that almost 40 per cent of male workers are engaged in construction and in other activities outside agriculture – and in the peri-urban village of Nosal this share is almost as high as 60 per cent.

Guerin and Carswell both draw attention to the extent of labour market segmentation on caste lines, and the disabilities especially of Dalits. As Guerin and her co-authors say ‘old hierarchies persist in the midst of the changes that India has undergone over the past decades’ though as Carswell concludes, ‘it is not simply that Dalits are excluded from urban jobs. Rather, some Dalits, from some villages, have less access to urban jobs than others...labour market segmentation works differently in localities just a few miles apart’ (2013: 335; and see Carswell and De Neve 2014a). The point is also brought out strongly by Heyer (2000b; 2010).

Land, Class and Caste Relations

The *Tamil Nadu Economic Appraisal 2010-11* draws attention to the skewed distribution of land holdings in the state, and suggests that it is one of the causes of low productivity (though the basis for this suggestion is not stated). It is said that ‘the marginal and small farmers who constituted a higher proportion of 91 per cent of the total farmers held a lesser extent of land holdings (59 per cent), whereas medium and big farmers [by which is meant those holding upwards of 4 ha., or about ten acres] who formed 2.3 per cent of total farmers, possessed a larger chunk of 20 per cent of land holdings’ (*TNEA 2010-11*: 37-8). This is even after a small decline in the numbers of medium and big farmers and in the extent of their holdings between 2000-01 and 2005-06.

Several of the recent village studies, given their thematic focus on labour, include only general observations on landholding. There are indications from others, however, of the increased incidence of landlessness, which might be taken as an indicator that the classic process of differentiation with the development of capitalism in agriculture is taking place, with increasing proletarianisation and polarisation between rural classes. Increased landlessness is shown in the study by A&N who find in their three villages in northern Tamil Nadu that landlessness has increased sharply (between 1993 and 2009) from 46 per cent to 60 per cent of households (and

amongst Dalits from 71 per cent to 80 per cent). In the peri-urban village, Nesal, nearly three-quarters of households (73 per cent) are now landless, including even 62 per cent of the households of the Agamudaiyan Mudaliars who were clearly the dominant land-holding caste of the village in the early 1970s, and were still so in the 1980s (see Harriss 1982). These are striking findings given the conclusions from mobility studies conducted in the same villages in 1983 that showed net reduction in landlessness and entry into agriculture (Harriss 1991) – exactly as Djurfeldt and his co-workers also found in their comparable studies in 1979. A similar picture to that from the three northern Tamil Nadu villages comes from Iruvelpattu, where the proportion of landless households increased from 29 per cent in 1981 to 49 per cent in 2008. In Heyer’s Tiruppur villages, landlessness increased from 40 per cent in 1981-82 to 51 per cent in 2008-9 (Heyer 2014a: 140, 142). In the area studied by Djurfeldt *et al.*, on the other hand, it appears that the share of landless households in the wet villages remained more or less constant over the 25-year period from 1979, and that it actually *decreased* quite sharply in the dry ones. The authors find, too, that inequality in the distribution of the operated area in their study region has gone down, as has inequality in the distribution of household income for all agrarian households. They hypothesise that the decline in overall inequality is the outcome of the increased significance in most households of non-farm income.

Djurfeldt and his co-authors specifically address what they refer to as ‘the proletarianisation and polarisation theses’ (2008: 55). Clearly, in the region they have studied, as in others, there is evidence of increased proletarianisation, given the increasing dependence on various forms of wage labour outside agriculture. But their findings on trends of inequality call into question the idea of ‘polarisation’. Their view is that what has gone on over the 25 years to 2004 has seen rather the reinforcement of family farming, with increasing reliance on household labour,¹¹ as both (the erstwhile) poor peasants and landless labourers, and some of the bigger landowners have moved out of agriculture (the latter at least in the sense that their interests are increasingly outside agriculture) – rather than ‘polarisation’ – even though they were not finally able to demonstrate this conclusively through their regression modelling. Heyer’s observations on what happened to the Gounders of her Tiruppur villages (2014b) point to a similar conclusion; and we

¹¹ In other words, they are suggesting that the ‘middle peasantry’ – as this category was understood in the classical literature on peasant societies – has been gaining ground. This goes against the expectation that these societies will eventually be transformed by a process of ‘differentiation’ so as to see a class of capitalist farmers on the one hand, and a rural proletariat on the other.

believe that much the same is probably true of trends in landholding in Dusi – where the remaining large Brahmin landlord-owned holdings that were still present in 1983 have been broken up (though with some sales of land for real estate developers). The focus on ‘the differentiation of peasant classes’ in much earlier research on agrarian change begins to seem misplaced.

But what of agrarian power and of landlordism? We have shown the continuing presence of one big Reddiar landlord in Iruvelpattu, even though his power is much more constrained than it was. From the same part of Tamil Nadu Guerin and her co-authors report as follows, with regard to the ‘semi-agrarian settlements’: ‘Most big landowners, all of whom are high caste, increasingly combine agricultural and non-agricultural incomes, but still farm land and live in the village, such that some vestiges of the old attached labour system remain’ (Guerin *et al.*, *mss*). They go on to describe two big landowners, each of them owning 70 to 100 acres of land, one of them now living in the US, who employs a manager to look after his lands, and the other still resident in the village who has five attached Dalit families, ‘two of them from far away who live in the cow shed’ (*ibid*). We may presume that the situation in the region, near Tiruchirapalli, that Djurfeldt and his co-workers studied is comparable with this, and these authors note from their studies of inter-generational mobility that it is still the ‘big farmers’ who face the least risk of downward mobility. Carswell notes of her Tiruppur villages that ‘the land-owning Gounders make up the dominant caste in terms of economic wealth and political power...they own most of the lands, wells and borewells. They are also dominant within the urban and rural parts of the textile industry’ (2013: 328). Heyer described the continuing power of the thottam farmers (predominantly Gounders) from her Tiruppur villages at least up to 1996. In spite of their weakened economic position, she wrote, ‘these thottam farmers still [as of 1996] had a surprisingly stronghold over labourers and others at the bottom of the hierarchy’ (2000a: 1). She showed that the Matharis (or Chakkiliyans) in the villages, the most numerous but also lowest status Scheduled Caste group, remained tied to agricultural employment:

This was partly because they were still getting a *relatively* attractive agricultural employment package in 1996, partly because they were in such a weak position in relation to alternative opportunities...(and)...Moreover, housing and increased indebtedness in the villages resulted in the Chakkiliyans being tied in some ways more

strongly to agricultural employment in 1996 than 1981-82. Other low caste labourers were getting urban and industrial opportunities that were likely to give them better prospects in the longer term. Chakkiliyans were not.¹² (Heyer 2000b: 1)

Her more recent studies in the same villages, however, show that while Dalits generally remain tied to agricultural employment, their conditions of employment have greatly improved (Heyer 2014b). The power of the Gounders is not what it was (Heyer, personal communication). The same is true of the Naidus of Pallakurichi. They are still the largest landowners but their control over the village, in 2000, was much less than it had been before (Manimohan and Jeyaranjan 2000). Agrarian power persists, therefore – very significant disparities in land ownership remain, and larger landowners are still commonly also moneylenders¹³ – but it is less significant than it was, and the classic landlordism of the past has certainly declined (see Harriss 2013a). In Gangaikondan, we know of a number of big landowners, even after the departure of the Brahmans who controlled virtually all of the land of the village a century ago, and of most the Forward Caste Pillais. But the big landowners include Scheduled Caste Pallars, as well as others from historically low ranking castes. We were unable to find indications of the persistence here of landlord power. This is a reflection of relative equality of social and economic status between the Pallars in this village, at least, and the otherwise most numerous caste community, the Thevars, and of the political power of the Pallars. In the northern Tamil Nadu villages, studied by A&N, there is evidence – as we noted above – that the formerly dominant landowners, the Agamudaiyan Mudaliars are leaving the land, possibly to the advantage of the Yadhavas, who resemble much more the ‘family farmers’, relying extensively on household labour, whose position is described by Djurfeldt and his co-authors in their study.

All the studies we are considering record the near disappearance of Forward Castes from the villages, as is the case of the Reddiars of Iruvelpattu, and of Brahmans and Pillais from Gangaikondan, and of Brahmans from Dusi. Djurfeldt *et al* say of their wet villages that ‘Brahmins used to own the lands farmed by Dalit tenants (but) today most of the lands have been

¹² Heyer’s points here draw attention to the segmentation in labour markets that is the subject of Carswell’s paper (2013), and that is also discussed by Guerin and her co-authors.

¹³ Carswell tells us that people in the villages she has studied usually prefer to borrow from the ex-landlords, rather than from roaming moneylenders who charge higher rates on interest.

taken over by middle and Dalit castes' (2008: 52). Guerin, too, notes that 'the upper castes have mostly moved away from the villages in recent decades to nearby towns, adopting urban jobs and lifestyles' (2013, *mss*) – as is the case of the Agamudaiyan Mudaliars further north. In Iruvelpattu and Gangaikondan, certainly, Dalits are becoming relatively more numerous in relation to other communities, and the caste structure is becoming increasingly simplified. There is a smaller range of caste groups in the villages than was the case in the past, as many of the specialist castes have moved away. Over much of northern Tamil Nadu Vanniyars and Paraiyars are the two major population groups in the villages, and increasingly confront each other. As Guerin and her co-authors note 'Vanniyars are a farming caste with a low ritual rank, classified as Most Backward Classes' (*ibid*), though they are here the locally dominant caste community, according to the way this idea has been used by anthropologists. Conflict often breaks out between them and the Paraiyars (as is the case in Iruvelpattu). Much the same is true of Thevars and Pallars in the southern districts, as we recount in our study of Gangaikondan.

Though residues of landed power persist, the major landowning castes no longer enjoy the same extensive powers over others that the village landlords once had.¹⁴ As Djurfeldt and his co-authors put it, 'opening of opportunities in the off-farm sector and policy interventions including affirmative action of various sorts have made it possible to an increasing extent for the Dalits to escape the indignity and degradation of village society' (and see Carswell and De Neve 2014a). This may mean that 'deprived of a cheap source of labour, the old patrons opt out of agriculture', as has certainly happened in the case of the Reddiars of Iruvelpattu (quotes here Djurfeldt et al 2008: 52). The research by Djurfeldt *et al.*, by Guerin and her co-authors, and by Heyer (2012), as well as our own studies in Iruvelpattu and Gangaikondan, show improvements in the living standards of many Dalits in rural Tamil Nadu.

Djurfeldt *et al* make the point rather too strongly, however, when they say 'being a Dalit is no longer as big a handicap in economic terms' (2008: 59) because we have to note the strong evidence in these village studies of labour market segmentation and of the disabilities confronted by Dalits in general and by the lowest ranked Dalit groups in particular. Such groups, like the Matharis/Chakkiliyans of Heyer's Coimbatore villages, must often find it difficult to stand up

¹⁴ There is some irony in the fact that the one village of which the recent study reports the persistence of labour attachment, and records an incident in which a landowner tied a Dalit labourer to a tree and subjected him to a public flogging, is a village dominated by Vanniyars, considered a 'Most Backward Class'. See Rukmani 2000.

against those who are locally powerful, and where they are bound by indebtedness (on which see the studies both by Carswell and by Guerin and her co-authors). Heyer concludes a recent essay with the words, ‘neither the modernisation of agriculture, nor urbanisation and industrialisation, has led to significant changes in the relative position of SCs. SCs still face greater barriers to progress than others among the working poor’ (2010: 241).¹⁵ And though many of the Dalits of rural Tamil Nadu, like those in Iruvelpattu, may have loosened ties of dependence, they still exercise little leverage over the political space.

Social Policy Interventions

A key question is, then, whether the recent raft of legislation that has created a new social welfare architecture for India – legislation that includes the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, the Right to Education Act of 2009, and the Food Security of Act of 2013 – has the potential to transform the state of ill-being especially of Dalits, and of women, all of whom as the studies we have reviewed clearly show, are discriminated against in labour markets. It is too soon for us to be able to reach very firm conclusions, but there are certainly indications of the positive impact of these new measures. It has come to be recognised fairly widely that Tamil Nadu has done, relatively, very much better than most other states in regard to human development – indeed, probably better than all other states, with the exception of Kerala. All the studies we have considered make some reference to the significance of social welfare interventions such as the public distribution system (PDS) – which has never been targeted in Tamil Nadu, and has a much better record for its efficiency than in other states (Himanshu and Sen 2011) – the noon meals scheme and the Integrated Child Development Scheme. The public health care system, too, generally works better in the state than elsewhere. Heyer provides an overview of the significance of social welfare interventions in the villages she has studied, reporting that Dalit labourers talk ‘about not having to work as much, or as hard, because of the PDS (etc)’ (2012: 102), and showing that ‘by 2008-9, it was clear that (state social welfare policy) was making a major contribution to labourers’ standards of living, something that it had not been doing either in 1996, or in 1981-82’ (2012: 106). Our own conclusions, from our study

¹⁵ The point is confirmed in Jeyaranjan’s rural non-farm study. Members of ‘Other Castes’ – neither Scheduled nor Backward – are much more likely to get into the better paid jobs in manufacturing.

of Iruvelpattu in particular, are like Heyer's. But village studies, so far, tell us relatively little about how and why these schemes function, as it seems, better than elsewhere in the country, or about their outcomes – except in general terms. A partial exception is that there are now village studies of the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Grace Carswell, with Geert De Neve, has recently completed a study of the implementation of MGNREGA in the two Tiruppur villages in which she had previously done the research on which we have commented in this paper (Carswell and De Neve 2014b). In 2011, the two researchers conducted a survey of 109 MGNREGA workers, carried on ethnographic research in the villages and at worksites, and interviewed site organisers and officials at different levels. They set out to interrogate different meanings of 'success' in regard to the programme, but they focus on 'localised understandings of success and...explore how success is understood and expressed by different social actors' (2014b: 3). Jeyaranjan (2011) conducted similar research in a village in Thanjavur, coming up with broadly similar findings – for the period after 2010 when the work schedule in the programme was relaxed and wages increased, which resulted in 'a ten-fold increase in the number who sought work' (2011: 66). Jeyaranjan is, however, perhaps less optimistic about the transformative potential of MGNREGA than are Carswell and De Neve.

According to these studies, MGNREGA in Tamil Nadu can be considered to be a success from several different points of view. The evidence, according to Carswell and De Neve:

...shows that MGNREGA reaches the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the rural population, including the old, infirm and widowed, and that Dalits and women are the primary beneficiaries...in terms of providing a degree of social security, MGNREGA is undoubtedly a success in Tamil Nadu. It is also clear that the workers themselves perceive the scheme as valuable to their livelihoods and to the maintaining of minimum levels of consumption. (2014b: 19)

Jeyaranjan, too, finds that the reworked NREGA, with other social interventions, has led 'to a new kind of diversification...towards a better livelihood for the poor' (2011: 73). As Carswell and De Neve say, however, the question of whether the scheme has brought about empowerment through rights-based law is harder to assess. They found 'clear evidence of empowerment both through increased wage levels in agriculture and a strengthened bargaining power of rural wage

labourers' (2014b: 19) – which has been particularly significant for low-caste women. On the other hand, there is little evidence of the realisation of the governance reform through the Scheme that some observers have thought possible because of the clause in the Act requiring the conduct of social audits (Harriss 2013b, referring to arguments put by Rob Jenkins). Carswell and De Neve concluded that 'while the scheme appeared to be implemented in an efficient and transparent way [being driven by a bureaucracy, tightly supervised from the chief minister's office, 'that is at least to some extent independent from local village elites'], there was no evidence that it established a new form of governance based on grassroots democracy' (2014b: 19). Such socially transformative potential as the scheme has, therefore, does not extend to the rural people's relationships with the state.

Conclusions

Commenting on findings from the Report No.554 of the National Sample Survey Organisation, on the 2011-12 round of studies on employment, the *Sunday Times* (for 9 February 2014) argued that 'the job scenario has been decidedly grim for more than a decade', and that this is a key issue for the 2014 general election. The phenomenon of 'jobless growth' has been widely commented upon. Nationally, the *Times* says, agricultural employment 'the mainstay for over two-thirds of the people, has practically not grown (in the 13 years from 1999-00)'. The sectors in which employment has grown are construction, which is now the second biggest employer in rural areas after agriculture, trade and hotels and restaurants ('which includes all petty shopkeepers, hawkers, roadside food-sellers etc.'). and 'other services' (including personal services 'like cooks, maids, guards, washermen, and so on'). As the *Times* goes on to say 'the booming sectors that are drawing people away from failing agriculture are very low paying. Also, these jobs are often seasonal, mostly contractual and with very minimalist facilities or benefits (offering only basic subsistence)'.

These national trends, over the more recent decade or so of the era of India's economic liberalisation when there has been sustained economic growth, are observed in Tamil Nadu as well, as the village studies on which we have commented here broadly show. Indeed, the studies show that agricultural employment in the state, both in own account cultivation, and in

agricultural wage work, has declined significantly, and more than in the country as a whole. Agriculture still remains the most important single sector for employment, but in many villages it now provides the main source of income for less than half of households. Construction probably is the next most important source of employment, but there is also a good deal of employment in manufacturing, in what is one of India's most industrialised states with a relatively highly diversified economy. According to the *Annual Survey of Industries* (ASI) data for 2005-06, Tamil Nadu then held the first position in terms of the number of factories and total number of persons engaged in various industrial processes across the country. Tamil Nadu is also, as we said at the outset, India's most highly urbanised state, with significant numbers of smaller towns and cities, and a high level of connectivity. This has facilitated the movement of labour, both in daily commuting (which was the case of 45 per cent of the workers in Jeyaranjan's sample of 12 villages in his rural non-farm study), and in longer term circular migration – whether to brickfields and construction sites, for sugar-cane cutting (as from the villages studied by Guerin *et al*), or for other activities.

Whereas it is quite often argued that workers are being pushed out of agriculture into 'distress' employment in other sectors (which may be the implication of the report in the *Sunday Times* from which we have quoted) there is little indication of this in the village studies from Tamil Nadu. Rather do these studies generally show up the tightening of rural labour markets, and increasing real wages, and (with less certainty) incomes, both in agriculture and outside it. There is probably less reliance on poorly remunerated self-employment in the state ('reluctant entrepreneurship') than is the case elsewhere in the country. These trends have been enhanced latterly by the extent of welfare provisioning in the state, as Judith Heyer, in particular, has argued from her village studies. The availability of cheap, and now free food grains through the PDS, and of employment through NREGA have further weakened the historic hold of landowners over rural labour. Though it is certainly too soon to speak of the disappearance of agrarian power, based on the continuing inequality in land ownership in the state, the village studies all tell of its decline. The phenomenon of landlordism, whereby a small number of larger landowners, usually from higher castes, exerted their sway over rural labour and society, through land-leasing and labour attachment on onerous terms, often combined with money-lending and speculative trading, has very largely disappeared from rural Tamil Nadu. Though there is evidence of increased landlessness from a number of the village studies, there is little or no

evidence that this has meant the consolidation of larger landholdings. Rather, in some cases, small-scale ‘family farming’ (as Djurfeldt *et al* term it), relying substantially on household labour, may well have been strengthened.

Yet we do not mean to paint a Panglossian picture. The village studies we have been able to study bear out Heyer’s conclusions:

Improved terms and conditions of employment and expanded state social welfare policy have combined to produce...substantially improved standards of living for the labourer population between 1981-82 and 2008-9. It is only in comparison with what were very poor standards in 1981-82 (or, we can add, 1991-92) that this looks impressive though. Labourers were still working hard for long hours for low pay. There were still few opportunities to move into employment other than low-skilled manual labour. State social policies may have improved the conditions of manual labourers, but they were not equipping many to move out of manual labour. These were policies supporting an economy relying on large quantities of relatively unskilled labour still (2012: 106)

We note, too, the strong evidence from the village studies of the continuing exclusion of Dalits, and of women, from better-paying non-agricultural activities. Tamil Nadu still has a long way to go in the achievement of greater social justice.

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