

T-shirts and Tumblers: caste, dependency and industrial work in Tiruppur's textile belt, Tamil Nadu

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I

Introduction: From Substantialization to Political Economy

Neoliberal economic policies are not new to India. While 1991 no doubt marked what Nayar calls a 'paradigm shift' from the state to the market (Nayar 2001: 129), processes of economic liberalisation were already introduced - albeit in a stealth-like and patchy manner - from the 1970s onwards (Nayar 2001). Over the last decades, therefore, neoliberal policies have facilitated the development of urban, industrial regions across India, of which the Tiruppur garment cluster in Tamil Nadu, South India, is a typical one. Yet, in a less direct manner, such policies have also brought about far-going transformations in rural society, which to date have been poorly documented, let alone conceptualised.

¹ This research was funded by an ESRC-DFID Research Award (RES 167 25 0296) and is based on 12 months of field research in Tamil Nadu, conducted between August 2008 and July 2009. The research would not have been possible with the assistance of our research assistants - most especially Gayathri, Arul and Muthu. The paper has benefitted from comments by Chris Fuller, Judith Heyer, David Mosse, Christian Struempell, and Patrick Neveling as well as participants at the *Neoliberal Crises in Post-Reform India* conference, Halle, September 2009.

In this paper we consider transformations in rural relations of caste and dependency in the Tiruppur region and seek to shift focus in the ways in which the nature and direction of changing rural caste relations are conceptualised and understood within current scholarship. We argue that while discussions about substantialization of caste have dominated much of the debate to date, an approach that highlights the political economy of regions might provide a more fruitful way of conceptualising changing relations and meanings of caste in the context of contemporary neoliberal transformations (Jeffrey 2001). While recent discussions of caste have commented at length on the erosion of its religious foundations and its renewed significance in the arena of politics, the changing economic foundations of caste have been sparsely documented (Béteille 1991, 1996; Fuller 1996), and we know in fact very little about the impact of ongoing transformations in rural economic relations on social and caste dependencies within the villages that were once studied in great depth.

Parry has recently argued that while Dumont's theory of caste has been thoroughly slated in recent decades, to the point that it is now usually passed over in silence, that part of it 'that has to do with the so-called "substantialization" of caste, continues to be invoked with some regularity' (2007: 482). Dumont, following Ghurye, identified substantialization as a process of social change marked by a 'transition from structure to substance' (1970: 226), in which castes no longer relate to each other as interdependent and hierarchically ranked groups, but rather as blocks in competition with each other (ibid.: 227). Separation and competition replace interdependence, and horizontal co-existence replaces hierarchical rank. Even though Dumont did not suggest that this

transition would take place in all places and all contexts to the same extent, it was certainly the main form of change that he identified. However, even substantialization remains necessarily incomplete for Dumont as it 'cannot amount to a fundamental transformation of the whole system' (Fuller 1996: 12) because change remains confined to the politico-economic domain, which is itself encompassed by a religious ideology that remains untouched (Dumont 1970: 228).

This last claim, however, has not stood up against empirical scrutiny. Several of the ethnographic contributions to *Caste Today* (1996), for example, clearly illustrated that the ideological and religious underpinnings of caste have largely waned, and that ideas of purity and pollution have lost much – if not all - of their legitimacy (Fuller 1996; Deliège 1996; Mayer 1996). Much of the literature on urban India in particular argues that while caste differences remain present, it is class position, culture and life-style that constitute the new idioms through which difference and separation are expressed and shaped (Donner 2008; Fernandes 2006; Liechty 2003). Against Dumont, therefore, there appears to be almost total agreement about the erosion of the ideology of purity and pollution as the basis of caste, at least as far as non-Dalit groups are concerned. However, when it comes to interactions between caste Hindus and Dalits, ideas of pollution and practices of untouchability have not completely vanished (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007; Mosse 1994; Still 2009). This leaves us with the obvious questions of what happened to caste, and indeed to substantialization?

There is little need to elaborate Béteille's now well-known argument that the 'future of caste lay not with religion but with politics' (1996: 159; 1991). While Béteille identified the many ways in which caste became used for political purposes by mobilising loyalties of relatedness, others too have shown how castes became units that compete for political and economic advantage – be it in relation to market opportunities or government reservations (Harriss-White 2003; Fuller 2003; Michelutti 2008). Yet, Béteille has been hesitant to take the enhanced competition between castes in the political arena as proof that substantialization is taking place. Indeed, he writes, 'the notion of substance conveys a sense of homogeneity, whereas in fact each caste is becoming progressively differentiated in terms of occupation, education and income' (1996: 172).

Fuller too recognises that at the empirical level there is

'... increasing differentiation of status, power and wealth developing *within* each caste – a development which is itself contributing to the decline of clear-cut caste ranking and hence, paradoxically, to an increasing normative emphasis on difference *between* castes. Substantialisation is, in effect, a self-contradictory process, because as it develops castes actually become more internally heterogeneous' (1996: 12-13).

However, Parry is right in questioning 'why the decline in clear-cut caste ranking resulting from differentiation within castes should necessarily lead to a greater emphasis on their difference' (2007: 484). Indeed, one could argue, as Parry does, that 'differentiation within the caste has become the basis for a new sense of identity with people of other castes whose life style is similar to one's own. ... It is not only hierarchy

and interdependence that have been significantly undermined; in many parts of South Asia, it is now, I believe, the sense of separation that is being progressively eroded ... ‘ (ibid: 484-85). Parry backs up his argument with ethnography from the ex-villages-cum-labour colonies on the fringes of the Chhattisgarh steel town of Bhilai, which illustrates how work-related collaboration and friendships, interdining, attending each others’ weddings and ceremonies, and even inter-marriage have become increasingly accepted forms of interaction among members of different Hindu castes in the Bhilai area. Such inter-caste exchanges not only make the boundaries between the castes involved more permeable but also reduce people’s preoccupation with separation and difference. The resulting ‘partial merging’ of castes – with the continued exception of Dalits – makes the argument about the increased separation between castes, and thus the substantialization logic itself, untenable (ibid.: 486; Parry 1999a, 2001).

In what follows we contribute to this debate by arguing that the substantialization thesis – with its focus on separation, independence, competition and horizontal organisation - is an inadequate analytical tool not only to explain the diversity and variation of transformations found across rural areas today, but also to grasp the changing relationships between rural caste Hindus and Dalits in particular. While Fuller recognises that we should not lose sight of *diversity* in the meaning and importance of caste in different contexts (1996: 26), it is clear that the concept of substantialization does not provide a conceptual frame to capture, let alone explain, the diversity of contemporary trends. Parry, following Ishii, also emphasises variation by commenting that substantialization is a ‘partial and patchy process’, but he rejects the argument that the

process results in the enhanced separation between castes, especially when it comes to higher and middle castes (Parry 2007: 486). Once again, the substantialization thesis proves inadequate to explain the intertwined and contradictory processes of separation, competition and differentiation.

Parry's own ethnography, however, is located in an urbanised and industrialised location, with high levels of mixing between people of different caste backgrounds, including locals as well as settled migrants. In Bhilai, class in many ways becomes the more powerful source of social stratification, with caste interdependency and hierarchy being largely meaningless in the urban context. Yet, even in this relatively cosmopolitan setting, the Dalit Satnamis retain some of their earlier stigma of untouchability, especially in the private sector outside the steel plant. The question, however, remains of what is happening in much more homogeneous rural contexts, where just two or three castes form the majority of the population, and where class distinctions continue to overlap with caste identities, and often with the Dalit-non-Dalit divide. Based on a comparative study of two villages, located in the Tiruppur textile belt, in Tamil Nadu, we identified radically opposing transformations in caste relations between villages located within the same socio-economic region. While in one locality autonomy and separation describe the changes that followed access to industrial job opportunities outside the village (*pace* Dumont), in the other village persistent relations of economic dependency – reproduced through relations of debt bondage - continue to shape caste relations that are both hierarchical and interdependent. In both villages, social relations are shaped around the direct opposition of high-caste Gounders and landless Dalits.

Such variation in transformations, we suggest, cannot be made sense of through a straightforward process of substantialization, but need to be located within a political economy framework that focuses on the interface between changing economic relations and the wider political environment, and that remains sensitive to what Jeffrey has called ‘the social geography’ of changing caste relations’ (2001: 219). Only an approach that considers the different economic opportunities that arise and the political power differences that allow some people to take up those opportunities can begin to explain some of the variation and diversity of transformations encountered even within a single region, and be sensitive to the spatial variations in the ways in which caste relations are being transformed. Or, as Parry puts it, if the sociology of India ‘in the past suffered some tunnel vision that produced an excessive preoccupation with the ritual and religious aspects of caste, today there is perhaps some danger of over-privileging the political aspects and of ignoring what has been happening to caste in other domains of social life’ (2007: 491). The domains of social life that we seek to restore in this ethnography are those that relate to transformations in economic interdependencies and patronage-based caste relations, as well as the related social relations of dignity and autonomy that lower castes seek to attain in the face of often persistent high caste dominance (Jeffery 2001; Mosse 1994). Our ethnography is a far cry from the villagers of Ramkheri who told Mayer in the 1950s that ‘there is no caste left’ (Mayer 1960: 48); we were told over and over again ‘this is a village, and here we have the *jati* problem’.

The ethnography we present here relates to the impact of processes of industrialisation on rural relations of caste and dependency in two villages, Allapuram and Mannapalayam, located on the edge of the Tiruppur garment region in Tamil Nadu. Thirty or forty years ago both villages would have been largely agricultural, with most inhabitants being either landowning farmers (Gounders) or agricultural labourers (Adi Dravida and Mathari, both Dalits)², and a few others engaged in service occupations such as barbers, dhobis and potters. Focusing on the access of Dalit communities to non-agricultural forms of employment both within the village and in the nearby industrial town of Tiruppur, we show how the relationship between the dominant Gounder community and Dalits has been transformed and explore how power and resistance have begun to take on substantially new forms.

The growth of the Tiruppur garment industry from the 1970s onwards began to attract workers from surrounding villages. Since then, but especially since the 1990s, many young Dalits (both Adi Dravidas and Matharis) from Allapuram began to exchange agricultural work in the village for garment work in Tiruppur, to where many now commute on a daily basis. Today, nearly half of households in Allapuram (across caste and class) have some involvement in Tiruppur, and for Dalit workers, access to job opportunities *outside* the immediate vicinity of the village has provided them with economic independence, loosened their ties with the Gounder landlords, and enhanced their self-confidence.

² The Arunthathiyars commonly refer to themselves as Matharis in the region, while the Paraiyars tend to refer to themselves as Adi Dravida when Hindu and 'Christian' in case of conversion.

In Mannapalayam, rather than people commuting to work in the garment industry, industrialisation took place within the village itself. This offered Mathari agricultural workers new employment opportunities within the village. However, village-based work ended up reproducing Matharis' dependency on Gounders for work, a dependency that has been carried over – albeit in a transformed way – from an agricultural to an industrial context.³

Whereas in Allapuram caste has lost *some* of its economic and social relevance, in Mannapalayam, the Gounders remain dominant in social, economic and political terms. Our research suggests that the physical location of non-agricultural employment is an important factor in shaping the sorts of transformations that may ensue. Thus, while industrialisation has led to significant opportunities and unprecedented freedoms for some Dalits, for others it has reproduced, and in some ways reinforced, older rural ties of dependency and even bondage. A focus on the social geography of changing caste relations, as suggested by Jeffrey (2001), places spatial differences at the heart of an analysis of regional transformation, and simultaneously reveals that – in spite of far reaching rural change - caste remains a central axis around which rural power struggles take shape.

The article will first introduce the industrial landscape in and around Tiruppur and the two study villages near this garment town, and then detail the access that Dalits have had to different types of non-agricultural employment. It will illustrate the different ways in which the availability of industrial employment has impacted rural social relations. By

³ See Carswell and De Neve (forthcoming).

way of concluding the article introduces the new politics of resistance that has developed in response to persistent economic dependencies.

II

Industrial transformation in the Tiruppur region

Located 50km east of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, Tiruppur is one of the largest knitwear garment manufacturing and exporting clusters in south Asia. It has boomed almost without interruption since the early 1970s when manufacturers began to export to Europe, and during the 1980s and 1990s the town transformed itself into a leading centre of garment production and export for the world market (Chari 2000; 2004). Tiruppur benefited from both the global rise in consumption of knitted garments and the relocation of garment production from Europe and North America to Asia. In this process of expansion, the local community of peasant farmers (Gounders) was turned into a new class of industrial capitalists (well-documented by Chari, 2004), and thus benefited from the new class openings created by trade liberalisation (Guha 2007: 692-719; Chatterjee 2008). Nowadays, the Tiruppur industrial cluster constitutes one of India's important foreign exchange earners, with a total export value of around Rs11,000 crore or \$2 billion in 2007. Over the years, the industry attracted ever larger numbers of commuters and long-distance migrants, some of whom settled in Tiruppur, while others remain temporary or circular migrants. Tiruppur is primarily a knitwear cluster, producing T-shirts, baby clothing, sportswear and nightwear for niche markets in Europe and increasingly northern America. Production is organised across different types of firms: from large fully

integrated export firms employing a few thousand workers, to small workshops specialising in one or two stages of the production process.

Whereas initially garment firms were located inside the town, over the last two decades the industry has expanded into the rural hinterland and today companies can be found in a circle of up to 10-15km around Tiruppur. This spatial expansion has had a number of direct impacts on the region. One is that several villages, once located outside the town, have become absorbed into the Tiruppur urban agglomeration and lost most if not all of their agricultural activity. Another impact lies in the steady demand for factory hands, and estimates suggest that there are about 10,000 production units in Tiruppur, employing more than 400,000 workers. For many workers in the immediate region around Tiruppur, garment work has become a desirable form of employment, and thousands commute daily from villages and smaller towns located up to 30-40km from Tiruppur. Here they typically work from 8.30am till 8.30pm, with a tea break in the morning and the afternoon and a one-hour lunch break. This is commonly referred to as a 'one and a half shift' (8 + 4 hours).⁴ While hours are long, a skilled tailor can earn up to Rs 600 per day.

One of the other textile sectors that also had far-reaching effects on rural employment in the region is the powerloom cloth manufacturing industry. Powerloom workshops spread as a rural small-scale industry across a belt of villages located in an area from north-west to south-west of Tiruppur – primarily a region where agriculture was in decline and where farmers and landowners began to search for alternative sources of income from the

⁴ For further details see De Neve, G., (2010a) There you are like a bird in a cage!: Indian garment workers critiquing Fordism and CSR. (Paper presented at the BASAS Conference, University of Warwick, April 2010).

1970s onwards. It is in this powerloom belt that we selected our second study village, Mannapalayam. In these villages, Gounder landowners began to set up powerloom units with anything from 4 to 50 looms. Initially they operated their looms with family labour, later recruiting Gounder wage labourers, and then local Dalits (Mathari). More recently, as looms continued to be established, Gounders began employing migrant workers from neighbouring districts, for whom they provide accommodation. In the powerloom units, locally referred to as *godowns*, labour is employed on radically different terms from the garment companies in Tiruppur. Powerlooms run 24 hours per day and operators work in two shifts: a week of 11-hour day shifts is alternated with a week of 13-hour night shifts. For a day-shift one can earn about Rs170 and for a night-shift up to Rs200, but much depends on the availability of electricity supplies and/or generators, and it is not uncommon for operators to earn only Rs120-150 per shift. While situated in the same textile region, Tiruppur's garment industry and the rural powerloom industry around it are largely unrelated in terms of products and markets, with powerlooms predominantly manufacturing plain cloth for local traders, which is then further processed for the domestic and export markets.

The effects of the above industrial developments on agriculture in the region have been considerable. Gounder landowners routinely complain about a lack of labour, and the rural 'labour problem' has become particularly acute in the light of rural workers' increased preference for factory over field. Gounder landowners have responded by offering higher wages for agricultural work, by switching from daily wage rates to contract rates for certain agricultural tasks, by employing labourers from outside the area

(on a contract basis) and by switching crop types. In particular, there has been an increase in coconut cultivation, a crop with low labour demands, particularly when irrigated using drip irrigation.⁵ Many Gounders have started businesses of their own in Tiruppur, effectively competing with fellow Gounders in the village for labour.

Allapuram and Mannapalayam

Let us now turn to the villages in which we carried out fieldwork between August 2008 and July 2009. Allapuram to the south of Tiruppur and Mannapalayam to the south-west of Tiruppur were selected to investigate the contrasting ways in which the rural hinterland is linked to and affected by Tiruppur's industry. Both villages are about the same distance from Tiruppur, but their linkages with the town and the textile industries of the region are very different. Allapuram, located outside the powerloom belt, is irrigated by a canal and still has a reasonably viable agricultural sector but also good access to garment work in Tiruppur. Mannapalayam, on the other hand, is only partly irrigated, but located within the powerloom belt it is a typical 'powerloom village'. In both these villages we carried out a household survey and undertook detailed in-depth field research over a period of about a year.⁶

Allapuram is located about 19 km south of Tiruppur and has a primary school, post office, ration shop, as well as a small number of tea stalls and petty shops. Here there are

⁵ For further details see Carswell, G., 2010. Not working for export markets: work, agency and livelihoods in the Tiruppur textile region. (Paper presented at Sussex Workshop, July 2010).

⁶ In total we surveyed 251 households in Allapuram (100% of the households listed on the school census, plus a small number not on the list) and 279 households in Mannapalayam (50% of the households on the school census plus 88 households that were not listed on the census).

two main sources of income for Dalit men and women: working as agricultural labourers (known as 'coolie') and commuting to Tiruppur for work in the garment industry. The village is well connected to Tiruppur: a town bus goes through the village every half hour throughout the day and about 15 different garment company vans pass through the village to collect commuters for work in the morning and bring them back home at night. Once there they work as tailors, ironing masters, cutting masters, etc in garment factories, while some non-Dalit women are involved in outsourced home-based work for the Tiruppur industry. Today, the residents of Allapuram - and especially the young men and to some extent young women - thus have some choice about how to earn a living: agricultural work in the village or garment work in Tiruppur.

In Allapuram, the land owning Gounders (BC) make up the dominant caste (28%) in terms of numbers, economic wealth and political power. Among the Dalits, there are about equal numbers of Adi Dravida Christians (23%, also known as Paraiyars) and Matharis (22%, also known as Arunthathiyars or Chakkliyors). Being Christians, the Adi Dravidas are officially categorised as BC, yet many of them have Hindu and thus SC on their community certificate. Even though many Adi Dravidas are Christian today, they continue to be socially perceived by caste Hindus in the village as Dalits, and like the Matharis, they used to be primarily involved in agricultural coolie work.⁷

The second village, Mannapalayam, is located a similar distance from Tiruppur (about 15 km to the south-west), but is poorly connected to the town with no direct buses or

⁷ The rest of the Allapuram population is made up of BC castes (15%) such as Nadars and Mudaliyors, and MBC castes (8%) such as barbers and dhobis.

company vans coming into the village. It has a primary school, the panchayat office, and several tea stalls and petty shops. But the most important thing about this village today – which indeed dominates the village – is the omnipresence of powerloom units. Even though there is a fair amount of farming taking place, today Mannapalayam is first and foremost a powerloom village. Most powerloom units in Mannapalayam are owned by Gounders and located in the centre of the village. These units tend to employ local Matharis, who live in their ‘colony’ (*cheri*) on the opposite side of the road. Other units have been established by Gounders on their farms ‘*thottams*’ outside the village. These units usually employ mainly migrant workers (of different castes) for whom they provide housing adjacent to the units.

In contrast to Allapuram, Mannapalayam has a large and diverse migrant population. Most have come for powerloom work, while others work as agricultural labourers and a small number of migrants lease agricultural land. Finally, some have come to settle permanently on house plots recently provided by the government. In Mannapalayam, like in Allapuram, the dominant caste (economically and politically) are Gounders (33%), who are land-owning farmers, powerloom owners, and often both. The second most sizeable group (32%) are Dalits, here almost exclusively Matharis, but with some recent migrants from other SC communities. The remaining third are a mixture of over 20 other castes (mainly BC and MBC) reflecting the large influx of migrants to the village. Thus while Mannapalayam is today a much more socially diverse village than Allapuram, here also the Gounders remain the dominant caste, with the Matharis as the economically dependent community.

Commuting to Tiruppur

The people of Allapuram tell us frequently that ‘without Tiruppur this village would not survive’ and Tiruppur is seen as a place of great opportunity for both the poor (who commute as workers) and the rich (who set up their own businesses). During discussions about local definitions of wealth one Gounder informant told us: ‘Earlier only landlords were considered rich... now with Tiruppur even others can be rich. It opens doors for people. Very poor people can also become rich if they work in Tiruppur.’ In recent years the industry has moved into the village itself: there are two checking centres which provide work to village women, and in early 2009 a small stitching unit was established in the village producing for the domestic market. There is also a ginning mill within the village which employs about 20 local people, one powerloom unit, and a number of people have transport businesses which are indirectly associated with the Tiruppur industry.

The garment industry has a significant impact on incomes in Allapuram where garment work is the primary source of income for 25% of households, and the secondary source of income for a further 15% of households. But household incomes only reveal part of people’s involvement in the Tiruppur industry, as there are a considerable number of young men working in the industry who contribute little or none of their salary to household income, but for whom garment work is nevertheless their main occupation.

In Allapuram, across all castes, people want their children to work in Tiruppur, which is seen as more attractive than working in agriculture. Gounder men often work as supervisors and managers first in order to gain the necessary experience to set up their own business or garment unit later on. Christians (or Adi Dravidas) were amongst the first to start work in Tiruppur in the 1970s, usually as helpers to tailors, but today many of them are employed as tailors, cutting masters and ironing masters, or they have become independent labour contractors, recruiting labour and managing contracts within garment companies. Significantly, Christians have not only taken up garment work in large numbers, but they have also been able to access the better jobs in the industry, with – to our knowledge - none of them working in the lower paid and dirtier dyeing, bleaching or other processing units. Garment work constitutes the primary source of income for 45% of the Christian households, which is one of the highest percentages in Allapuram, and reflects their high dependency on garment work today, while a further 10% have garment work as their secondary source of income.⁸

The village Matharis, the poorest and socially lowest ranking caste of the region, are also involved in garment work, but their involvement seems to be more recent and is still not as widespread. 13% of Mathari households cite garment work as their primary source of income, and a further 11% as their secondary source.⁹ Age is important too: most older Mathari men and women make their living from irregular and seasonal agricultural coolie work, younger men and women increasingly take up work in Tiruppur. Today Mathari youth, on leaving school, often begin work in the garment industry, without ever having

⁸ 61% of Adi Dravida households have an individual member working in the garment industry.

⁹ 27% of Mathari households have an individual member working in the garment industry.

worked in the village fields. While they may not always immediately be able to access the best jobs in the industry, an increasing number of them have become tailors or cutting masters, with several Matharis even acting as labour contractors. What continues to stop many Matharis from going to Tiruppur is a lack of confidence and low self esteem: young men and women in their early 20s told us that they feel too old to learn garment work and they often repeat: 'we only know agricultural work'. A 24 year old Mathari woman, for example, explained why she worked in agriculture rather than in Tiruppur: 'If we had gone at a young age it would have been easy, now I can't learn the trade'. Such statements show how even in their early 20s Matharis feel it is too late to learn new skills or move outside the village for work, and are thus stuck with whatever agricultural work is available in the region.

There is also a gender dimension to this: for women in Allapuram work in Tiruppur becomes problematic once they have children because of the long hours. For this reason involvement in home-based work (checking, trimming and labelling) is important for them. This work, however, is still limited and is dominated by BC and MBC castes (mainly non-Gounders), while Mathari women remain excluded from it. It is the middle ranking castes who get the best access to businesses in Tiruppur and who are able to outsource home-based work to the village, so it is not surprising that they offer this work to their own wives, daughters and neighbours first, leaving Mathari women with only agricultural work as a source of livelihood.

So how does garment work compare to agriculture? There are different issues to consider. Firstly, wages in Tiruppur are generally higher than in agriculture. In Allapuram, there is a range of agricultural wages, but the lowest daily wage for women workers is about Rs 100 per day (possibly Rs 80 at certain times of the year), but during the onion harvest there are possibilities of earning up to Rs 200. For men, daily wages range between Rs 150 at normal times and Rs 300 during harvest seasons. Agriculture is highly seasonal and for some months of the year there is little work available. In contrast wages in the garment factories of Tiruppur are potentially much higher. While the starting wage in a garment factory as a helper (*kaimadi*) is similar to what can be earned in agriculture (minimum Rs 80 per shift, or Rs 120 per day) there is potential for significantly higher wages once skills are acquired. Experienced powerloom tailors earn between Rs180-Rs300 per day, while singer tailors, who are usually paid piece rates, pride themselves on the fact that they often take home Rs 500-600 per day. There is also considerable scope for upward mobility within the garment industry: helpers learn tailoring on the job and become powerloom tailors over time, and entrepreneurial tailors may in turn manage to become labour contractors, supervisors or 'in-charge' as their career advances. In contrast, agricultural labourers have no such opportunities for progression, and so are stuck on the lowest wages.

Yet, while incomes are higher in Tiruppur, the working hours are also longer than those in agriculture. A daily agricultural worker will typically work from 8am to 3pm (with an hour off for lunch), in contrast to Tiruppur where a typical day runs from 8.30am to

8.30pm (a shift and a half) while double shifts (until midnight) are not unusual.¹⁰ But despite the longer hours, there is no doubt that people perceive the working conditions in Tiruppur to be attractive. While we may think of garment factories as hot and crowded 'sweat shops' with poor working conditions, people in the village see these very factories are seen as rather desirable places to work. Workers routinely comment on the contrasts with agricultural work: they can work out of the sun and under a fan, much of the work can be done sitting down, and men can dress in shirt and trousers and women in a neat salwar kameez or saree. Tiruppur work is perceived to be clean work (at least in the CMT (cutting manufacturing trimming) units), and those who work in Tiruppur are frequently described as 'neat' and 'clean'. Perhaps most importantly, although many struggle to get to Tiruppur and to access the best garment jobs in town, the *potential* that the town offers is much more prominent in people's minds than the chances of failure that it contains.

In contrast to garment work, agricultural work in the sun is physically very arduous and widely perceived to be dirty work (see also Parry 2003). One Gounder landowner complained about the difficulties of finding agricultural workers, and when asked why they preferred to go to Tiruppur replied simply 'it is neat there, compared to here in the dust and sand.' A 16 year old Mathari boy who had been working for a couple of months as a helper in Tiruppur contrasted this work with agriculture where 'you have to sweat and take heavy loads'. For young men such as him the times when there is *no* work in Tiruppur is also part of the attraction: 'in Tiruppur, when there is no work, we can roam around in a jolly way and go to the park or the cinema!' Devaraj, a Mathari man who has

10 For more on the transition to the shorter day in agriculture see Carswell, G., (2010) Not working for export markets: work, agency and livelihoods in the Tiruppur textile region. (Paper presented at Sussex Workshop, July 2010).

been working for 10 years in Tiruppur, and his mother joked about young women's work in Tiruppur illustrating how urban garment work is perceived in the village: 'The girls, they just put lipstick on, get on the bus, watch the boys, have a tea in the shop and come back – that's all they do! They don't want to work hard anymore!' Devaraj's wife added 'we can immediately tell the difference between those families who work in Tiruppur and those who do not: they are better off, they are neater, they have neat dresses, and more expensive dresses, and their houses are neater ... we can easily tell.' Tiruppur is the place of *nagarikam* (civilisation; sophistication) and working in Tiruppur enables you to take part in more sophisticated urban life. While *nagarikam* can be many things at the same time, it is in any case a source of aspiration, and those who work in Tiruppur are able to bring some of it back to the village.

Indeed, as important as income and conditions of work are considerations of status and dignity, treatment by employers, and how social identity impacts on employment chances. Such issues are particularly important to people of low caste, who have a history of exclusion and discrimination. Let us first have a brief look at the role of caste in the garment industry. First, it became clear to us from talking to both Dalit workers and high caste employers that caste as an aspect of social identity has lost much of its relevance in the Tiruppur industry. Given the extensive boom in the industry over the last three decades, factory owners and labour contractors are continuously in need of workers and seek to employ whoever is capable of doing the job, irrespective of a worker's caste or religion. Owners and contractors explicitly state that they neither care nor ask about their workers' caste; all they need is a worker who can produce garments to specified

standards. This discourse is borne out in practice: in most garment units people of all castes work side by side, and caste is rarely a topic of conversation among employers or labour contractors

Secondly, caste has become less and less of an issue between workers on the shop floor. In everything from small workshops to large export houses we observed that workers of higher and middle ranking castes work alongside Dalits, drink tea together and have lunch at the same table, canteen or tea shop. For example, two of the workers in a small Tiruppur workshop were Dalits (Paraiyars) working alongside Gounders, Naickers and Mudaliyars. They visited each other's houses, went to the cinema together and formed close friendships that extended beyond the shop floor. One highly skilled tailor was a Dalit who worked for a Naicker labour contractor and had a young Gounder man assisting him as a helper. Their everyday interactions on the shop floor reflected hierarchies of skill, age and masculinity but much less – if at all - of caste (cf Parry 1999b; 2003).

Thirdly, the organisation of the industry and the recruitment of labour is such that skill or migrant background is usually much more relevant than caste. Much of the garment labour force is recruited through labour contractors, especially in the smaller companies. Labour contractors take a contract with a company (e.g. they are responsible for the production of 8,000 T-shirts), and they themselves recruit tailors and helpers. The composition of such teams of workers, headed by a contractor, changes almost daily in response to the size of the contract, the type of product made and the skills required.

Contractors, therefore, need to be able to call on a large pool of tailors, any one of which may work for them today but for a different contractor tomorrow.¹¹ In such a situation it is crucial for contractors to maintain good relationships with as wide a pool of labourers as possible so as to be able to get the required workers whenever needed. As a result, while contractors may recruit - to some extent - along the lines of caste and/or shared place of origin (for migrants), their contacts always extend beyond the narrow confines of caste and incorporate people of all communities, including Dalits.¹²

Caste, thus, does not act as a barrier to access the garment industry and Dalits from the region have – in recent years in particular - managed to enter the industry in a variety of jobs. However, while Dalits on the whole agree that caste is rarely considered by employers, some remain apprehensive about how co-workers view and treat them, and as a result several Dalits admitted trying to hide their caste by eschewing talk about caste, talking Tamil in the workplace (rather than Telugu, the Matharis' mother tongue), lying about their place of residence and lying about their caste, if asked. Yet, while some complain about others avoiding drinking tea with them once they find out their caste, most agree that such avoidance rarely impacts on their access to work or their chances of 'coming up' within the industry. But there is no doubt that the anonymity of the urban context (compared to the village) is very attractive to Dalits, who feel that being unknown also means they are unstigmatised.

¹¹ Given the organisation of the garment industry, the mobility of labour between factories and contractors, and the constantly fluctuating amounts of work available in any single company, cash advances that seek to bind workers more permanently to factories or contractors would not make sense.

¹² For further details see De Neve, G., 2010b. Of Contractors Old and New: Trajectories and Roles of Labour Contractors in the Tiruppur Garment Industry. (Paper presented at Sussex Workshop, July 2010).

Let us now turn to Dalits' access to non-agricultural work in our second village, Mannapalayam.

Powerloom work in Mannapalayam

The residents of Mannapalayam, our second village, are even more involved in non-agricultural work, but here industrial employment has become available within the village itself, which has led to very different social and economic transformations. In Mannapalayam the powerloom industry is the primary source of income for 54% of households, and secondary for a further 9%. For most families, garment work in Tiruppur is inaccessible, with only 3% of households mentioning it as a primary source of income. This might at first seem surprising given Mannapalayam's proximity to Tiruppur, and to understand this we need to take a closer look at how labour is recruited and employed within the village powerloom industry.

In Mannapayalan people of almost all castes work in the powerlooms, albeit under very different conditions. Gounders are by and large the owners of powerloom units in the village, while local Matharis, who used to work as agricultural labourers for Gounders, work as the powerloom operators. Today younger Matharis (i.e. under the age of 40) are almost exclusively employed as powerloom operators or as cone winders. Few Matharis under the age of 30 have ever done agricultural wage labour, which is now almost entirely the domain of older men and women (older being 40+), and a minority of young

women. Mathari women are primarily employed during the day as cone winders, as only women without small children who can work alongside a male relative are able to do night shifts as a loom operator. As a result, married women with children either do cone winding work or turn to agriculture as a way of earning an income.

Compared to agricultural work, powerloom work has both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, powerloom workers mention the slightly higher wages (Rs 170-200 for operators and Rs 100 for cone winders) and the regularity of employment, compared to the highly seasonal and unpredictable work in the fields. But they complain about the night shifts, which they say 'don't suit their body' and undermine their health. All powerloom operators work a week of 13-hour night shifts followed by a week of 11-hour day shifts, thus working considerably longer hours than agricultural labourers, who here work also from about 8am till 3pm. Powerloom workers also complain about the dust and the deafening clatter of the looms, as well as the physically taxing nature of the job, which requires operators to stand for hours at a stretch. Another disadvantage of powerloom work, compared to work in Tiruppur, is that there is no 'career' to be made in the powerloom sector – once a powerloom operator, always a powerloom operator - and the scope for mobility is limited to those very few who can raise sufficient capital to start a unit of their own.

As the number of powerloom units expanded between the 1970s and 1990s, the demand for loom operators skyrocketed and employers began to hand out increasingly large cash advances (*baki* or *munnpanam*) to attract and hold on to labour, including both local

Matharis and migrant workers, not unlike what happens in other powerloom regions of Tamil Nadu (De Neve 1999). Cash advances were offered as a simple way for powerloom owners needing a constant and stable workforce to try and bind labourers to them. Whereas initially these advances did not amount to much more than a few hundred rupees given on recruitment, they quickly grew into much more substantial sums of money, and today 80% of workers we sampled have advances of Rs 3,000 upwards.¹³ The average advance in our sample was nearly Rs 27,000 per worker, but some households with several powerloom workers have total advances of over Rs 50,000, and we came across one household who had received a total advance of Rs 3 lakhs.

Both employers and workers complain about the system of advances. Employers grumble that despite being given large amounts of money (or *because* they are given large sums of money) operators often do not turn up for work. The Matharis of the village, on the other hand, say they are now tied to the Gounders through debt-bondage. While Matharis with advances do shift between powerloom units in the village or even the region, transferring their debt from one owner to another, very few of them are able to leave the powerloom industry altogether as this requires them to settle their powerloom debts first. As self-professed bonded labourers (*kottadimai*) they are stuck in the village and unable to move into garment work in Tiruppur. Only for the youngest Matharis, who have steered away from powerloom work altogether and never taken a cash advance, has Tiruppur become a real option.

¹³ As part of the Mannapalayam survey of 272 households we did a more detailed 'worker survey' with 93 workers.

For most others, however, the road out of Mannapalayam is not an easy one, as the case of Shanmugam, a 26 year old Mathari illustrates. Shanmugan started powerloom work in 1996, at the age of 13. At the time of a powerloom strike in August 2008, however, he left for Tiruppur along with some other men, attracted by the promises of better pay and better work.¹⁴ His parents encouraged him to take up garment work, but because he had a debt with his previous employer, he pledged his sister's jewels in the bank (for Rs 20,000) to repay the powerloom owner. However, once in Tiruppur he found it hard to find a suitable job. At the age of 25, he felt too old to work as a helper to a tailor, and thus started as an assistant to a cutting master. But standing all day at a cutting table wasn't easy and, therefore, in late 2008, he took a free one month government training course in tailoring, with the aim of becoming a tailor and earning a better wage. After training he went to work as a singer tailor in a company but working too slowly and making too many mistakes meant he only managed to hold on to the job for a couple of months. He explains: 'many of the girls on the training had already worked for two or three years as a helper and so it was easier for them [to learn tailoring]'. He ended up going back to being a helper for a salary of Rs 100-140 per day. But the low pay, the bad bus connection from the village, and the frustration of having to work as a helper at his age, made it no longer worthwhile. By the end of 2008, he was back at work in the powerlooms of Mannapalayam. When we spoke to him in June 2009, he had not yet taken on a new cash advance but said he would soon have to ask for one as he still had to

¹⁴ In early August 2008, a strike broke out across the powerloom sector in the region during which powerloom owners stopped production to protest against a reduction in rates paid to manufacturers by cloth dealers. During this strike all looms in Mannapalayam came to a standstill and while some powerloom workers turned to agricultural work, many younger men took the opportunity to try out work in the garment sector. About 80 men began to commute to Tiruppur, where they got into garment work as helpers to tailors. Unfortunately however, once the strike was over, most men had no choice but to return to the looms to which they were tied by their outstanding debts.

repay Rs 20,000 to the bank as his sister wanted her jewels back. But he seemed determined to pay back a new advance on a weekly basis, 'otherwise', he explained, 'I will be tied (*kattupadu*) again and unable to go anywhere else!' Shanmugam's case not only illustrates how strongly young Mathari men aspire to access garment jobs in Tiruppur, but also how aware they are that debt bondage keeps them tied to the village, the powerlooms and the Gounders.

But Gounder control of the powerloom labour force is achieved not just through the payment of advances, but also through caste solidarity and political manoeuvring. The best example of this is probably the lack of a direct bus connection from the village to Tiruppur, which is surprising given its proximity to the town. But this is not a matter of coincidence. Gounders themselves admit having 'blocked' the town bus from coming into the village, as well as having 'dissuaded' owners of garment companies from bringing company vans to collect workers. Put simply, they want to make it as difficult as possible for 'their workers' to access job opportunities outside the village. Many Mathari powerloom operators, aspiring to work in Tiruppur, mentioned that they simply cannot commute because of the lack of a regular and direct bus to town. That politically powerful Gounders have successfully kept their labour force 'captured' in the village is a source of much bitterness and anger amongst the Mathari.

III

Changing caste relations

This leads to the broader question of how these ongoing economic transformations are impacting on the social and political dimensions of caste in the villages. In Allapuram both agricultural workers and landowners agree that Gounders have changed the way they treat Mathari workers, particularly in terms of how they address them. One Gounder farmer recounted how despite this 'kindness' he still found it difficult to get workers: 'Earlier it was different. Now we give coffee, we use kind words – *papa* (little one), *kannae* (you're my eyes – an affectionate word used for children), *ponnae* (little girl – another affectionate word) - earlier we'd say *indaa* (come here! - a very disrespectful way of calling a man), but still people don't want to come here for work.' Mathari workers agree that forms of address have changed but they also recount stories of how they are still shouted at, and at times slapped, if not beaten.

While Gounders may now treat their workers more respectfully than they used to, they only do so because they *have* to – they realise that labourers can walk away from agriculture. The younger generation can work in Tiruppur, while an increasing number of older Dalits rely indirectly on garment incomes of sons and daughters. Yet, little has changed to the underlying feelings of superiority amongst the landowners, which surface when they talk about how lazy and uncommitted Matharis are. Gounders' loathing of Matharis becomes particularly clear when they talk about the latter's attitudes to work, a discourse that is closely related to their loss of control over Matharis as a labour force in the village. Moreover, both Matharis and Adi Dravidas continue to be largely excluded from social and religious functions in the village and rarely enter the houses of Gounders.

Yet, interestingly, as the Allapuram Dalits are leaving agriculture and commute to Tiruppur for work, they are rapidly losing their interest in the Gounders and have begun to distance themselves from those who once had a strong grip on them. As they become more economically independent, they are increasingly able to avoid interaction with Gounders, and so care less and less about what the latter think of them. 'Separation' between Dalit and Hindu castes is indeed the process being witnessed here.

In Mannapalayam, however, caste relations have evolved in the opposite direction, with mounting tensions between Gounders and Matharis. Here, caste antagonism is a source of everyday conflict and the relationship between the two communities is marked by mutual bitterness and expressed hatred. The reason for this is the continued mutual dependence between the two communities. The Gounders need the Matharis to operate their looms and they try to recruit and retain them through cash advances. Powerloom owners do not want the advances repaid as this amounts to losing a powerloom operator. Yet at the same time, they grumble about how they themselves are now 'tied' to Mathari workers, whom they accuse of being lazy and unreliable, *precisely because* they have received cash advances and know that the Gounders cannot dismiss them.

While Mathari powerloom operators admit that they were initially keen to receive cash advances, they do realise the drawbacks of debt. They are very aware that powerloom work for the local Gounders has meant they have transferred their economic dependence from an agricultural to an industrial context, and that the advances have landed them in

new relations of bondage.¹⁵ Whereas agricultural labour today is effectively ‘free labour’ as it mainly takes the form of daily coolie work or short-term contract work, industrial work in Mannapalayam has turned powerloom workers into bonded labourers, unable to leave the looms for work elsewhere. Given that very few powerloom workers are able to pay off their debts, it is only the youngest Matharis, who have not yet started powerloom work or who have not yet built up any debt, who can give it a try in Tiruppur. Here, interdependency, hierarchy and rank continue to shape the forms and meanings of caste.

In conversations about what makes Tiruppur work so attractive, Matharis often highlight issues of caste. In an interview with three young men – Ramesh, Kamaraj and Kandhan - in the Mathari colony of Mannapalayam, the weight of caste in the context of work was made clear to us. Unusually for young men of their community, all three worked outside Mannapalayam, but two of them had, at different times, worked in the powerlooms as well, and were therefore in a good position to contrast work in the different settings. Ramesh was very positive about working in Tiruppur, saying ‘no-one needs to work as an *adimai* (slave) in Tiruppur’. Many Matharis used the words *adimai* (slave) and *kottadimai* (bonded labourer), reminiscent of earlier agricultural relationships, to refer to their current situation in the powerlooms. This bondedness is experienced on a day-to-day level in their interactions with Gounders. Young powerloom operators routinely comment on the fact that they are at the beck and call of Gounders, and that they have lost all forms of freedom – even to take a day off. They complain that even if they are ill, the Gounder employer will knock on their door in the morning and call them to work.

15 For more on bonded labour see Carswell. G. and G. De Neve (forthcoming), ‘From field to factory: Tracing bonded labour in the Coimbatore powerloom industry, Tamil Nadu’, *Economy and Society*.

They talked about the lingering ‘community problem’ in the village and the ‘tension’ that exists between themselves and the Gounders, using the English terms. Ramesh explains: ‘In the godowns they have two separate water pots – one for us and one for them [caste people], two separate teas – one for us and one for them. Tumblers are always separate in the godowns. ...Earlier it was the same in the teashops, there were separate tumblers. But we made it a big issue about one year ago, and now we get the same tumblers. But it’s only changed in the teashops, not in the godowns.’ To avoid the issue of having to share water in the godowns, many Matharis now take water bottles from home. In contrast, they noted, ‘in Tiruppur people don’t look at one’s caste. Here people look at caste. ... That gives us stress. All are humans but we’re perceived to be lower and that gives us stress, ‘*manasula*’, it affects us psychologically. I cannot accept it.’

It is the small things that Matharis mention: the fact that they can enter Gounder’s factories, but not their houses. The fact that they may be involved in the construction of Gounder houses, but after the *puja* that blesses the house, they can no longer enter it. They are not allowed to enter the village temple, which was recently extended and renovated with Gounder contributions, and then there is the tumbler issue. In the teashops of Mannapalayam there used to be a ‘two-tumbler policy’, with glasses being used for Matharis (which they washed up themselves) and steel cups for everyone else. While on the surface this has now disappeared, several informants told us that it does still exist but in a much more subtle form. Today, the same type of cups is used for everyone, but some are set aside for use by Matharis. Furthermore, in one of the village teashops

(run by a Gounder) Dalits are only allowed to sit in the outer part of the shop, and one Mathari man told us he can't go to that tea shop as 'it won't be good for me.' In the other teashop there is also a more subtle discrimination: for example, a Mathari man was told that there was no container available to take tea out for a group, while the same teashop had a container a few minutes later when a non-Dalit asked for it. In other tea shops – for example in Allapuram - all customers are served with disposable cups and although this means that all people are being treated 'equally' it rankles some Dalits, as it still avoids the Gounders actually having to share cups.

In contrast to these experiences in the village, the young men explained that in Tiruppur the employers 'don't see the person, they see the talent'. Owners do not ask about one's caste in Tiruppur, and according to Ramesh 'even if they know, they won't mind'. In his case, Ramesh's Tiruppur employer did not know his caste, and he said he wouldn't tell him. But what counts is that Tiruppur provides a context in which one can work without having to be known by others and without having to reveal one's caste identity. However, Kamaraj's owner did know his caste, because he did business in the area. But it didn't seem to matter. Kamaraj was eager to stress that his owner was good: 'I never even call him *sir*, I call him *annan* (older brother). In Tiruppur, the most important thing is the business, and caste does not play a role in that.'

When asked which of the following factors (hard work, working hours, health, caste, advances, and night shift) made them most keen to work in Tiruppur, all were unanimous that 'caste' was the definitive issue. Ramesh went as far as to say that caste 'is the only

reason' why he wanted to work outside the village. However, these three young men are in many ways the exception. Unlike Shanmugam and most others, they managed to avoid the trap of debt and to access garment work in Tiruppur. They also have motorbikes and are therefore not dependent on town buses for their daily commute. None of them are married, so they can easily stay overnight in Tiruppur whenever they need to work till midnight or later.

But for most others, even young men in their early 20s, getting advances early on in their working lives has made it impossible to break out of the powerloom industry. Moreover, the starting wages in garments are low compared to powerloom wages, so that slightly older and especially married men find it hard to take a pay cut and to work as a helper to a sometimes younger (and possibly female) tailor. It is only once one has become a skilled tailor that garment work becomes more lucrative. Moreover, young married men usually cannot afford to take a salary cut at a point in life when their financial commitments to the family are on the rise.

Relations between Gounders and Dalits in Mannapalayam are strikingly more fraught with tension than in either Allapuram or Tiruppur. People frequently refer to the '*jati kavalaram*' or 'caste problem' that they experience in the village. This problem consists not only of the persistent caste discrimination faced by Dalits, but also of the ways in which their continued economic interdependence has turned their co-habitation in the village into a particularly unhappy marriage. But Gounder power has not gone uncontested, and antagonistic situations come to a head at not infrequent intervals. While

Gounders continue to hold sway over Matharis, either as landlords or powerloom owners, the latter have not been entirely without tools to voice their anger and unhappiness. One such tool - and a major topic of conversation among both Gounders and Matharis - is the so-called 'PCR Act'. Through this Act, and the associated SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, Dalits across India seek to take action against discrimination by higher caste peoples.¹⁶ In the Coimbatore-Tiruppur powerloom belt, Matharis have used this Act not only in an attempt to curb forms of caste-based discrimination but also as a reaction to bondedness in the powerloom industry. In Mannapalayam itself a number of PCR cases have been filed, including one against the Panchayat President. Workers see the PCR Act as a way of fighting the otherwise impenetrable power of Gounders: as one man who had filed such a case told us 'if there was no PCR we wouldn't be able to put any case in the Police Station. The police will always favour the Gounders.' Examples of the reasons behind PCR cases include disputes over salaries, bonuses and advances. Powerloom owners acknowledge that they are scared of the PCR Act, and they claim Matharis are all too eager to put 'false cases'.¹⁷ In fact many cases are settled before they reach court, and Gounders freely admitted paying large sums of money (to either the police or the claimant) to settle the cases. Despite this Dalits see the PCR Act as one of the only weapons they have and 'PCR cases', as they are locally referred to, have become a key tool in the struggle between Gounders and Matharis in the region.

¹⁶ The PCR Act was a 1976 Act entitled 'Protection of Civil Rights Act', which was enacted to make the 1955 Anti-Untouchability Act more stringent and effective. In 1989 the government enacted a further Act, the 'Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act' in order to prevent atrocities against members of SC/ST communities. S. Thorat (2002), 'Oppression and Denial: Dalit Discrimination in the 1990s', *Economic and Political Weekly* February 9, 2002

¹⁷ Opposition to the PCR Act and its alleged 'misuse' was a central part of the campaign of the new Gounder political party in the May 2009 national election.

IV

Conclusion

Dynamic processes of industrialisation under India's neo-liberal regime have had far-reaching and diverse impacts on rural social and economic relationships. The region around Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu is a fitting place to analyse such transformations not only because the impacts of the garment industry reach far into Tiruppur's hinterland, but also because the social and economic effects of having a major export cluster on one's doorstep vary considerably across the region. Industrial transformations certainly do not lead to any linear reductions of caste inequalities; rather, they yield a varied picture of the ways in which caste is lived and experienced, and indeed of how its relevance shifts in different arenas of village life.

In Mannapalayam, caste relations remain fraught as Gounders and Matharis continue to depend upon each other within the village powerloom industry, and their interdependency appears to have become - if anything - more formalised and stronger over time. In certain ways Matharis are now 'captured' by their employers, and speak with bitterness of the political manoeuvring which has kept the town buses and company vans from entering the village, and of the cash advances that prevent them from leaving for garment work in Tiruppur. Incorporation into rewarding rural industrial work has meant exclusion from even more desired urban industrial employment. Here, caste antagonism and discrimination persist most ardently, and dignity (or rather the lack thereof) figures centrally in Dalits' sense of being trapped in the village.

In Allapuram, on the other hand, an almost opposite trend can be identified. Here, Dalits have begun to commute in large numbers to work in the Tiruppur garment industry, and their dependence on agricultural work and Gounder employers has drastically shrunk as a result. Gounders and Dalits depend less on each other economically, and their relations are much less fraught. In this village, caste has lost much of its previous social significance as the two communities are increasingly disinterested in each other, and live independent lives. Access to independent employment in Tiruppur not only offers economic autonomy but also boosts Dalits' self-esteem and opens the door to participation in modern, urban life (*nagarikam*). That said, however, significant gender and age inequalities are being reproduced with the availability of industrial employment. Older people, in both villages, continue to rely on casual agricultural labour, while young women have much more limited access to better opportunities in both the garment and powerloom sector than young men. This seems to echo what both Harriss-White and Janakarajan (2004) and Harriss (2006) have written about rural transformations in North Arcot: while rural dynamism comes from non-agricultural work, a great deal of the new employment is biased against women, the lower castes and the rural poor.

The substantialization thesis, with which we began this article, can hardly capture such diverse transformations, not in the least because it fails to shift the analytical focus beyond the village boundary. Rooted in an orientalist tradition that produced images of the Indian village as a bounded and self-contained community (Cohen 1970; Fuller 1977), the substantialization argument seeks to explain transformations in caste from a

view that continues to assume the self-contained nature of the village economy. By thus ignoring villages' embeddedness in wider economic and political relationships, it not only fails to account for the complexity and diversity of contemporary change but also contributes to reproducing the bounded village perspective that produced the idea of substantialization in the first place. Instead, we propose a political economy approach to the study of caste that attempts to map a regional geography of changing caste relations. Such an approach is new in that it places the regional political-economy rather than the village at the heart of its analysis and seeks to understand intra-village change within the context of wider – and often radical - regional transformations. Indeed, as we have shown here, it is precisely the ways in which villages are being integrated into wider regional transformations that affect the dynamics of caste, relations of dependence and experiences of dignity within the village.

Dumont's argument that substantialization cannot amount to any fundamental change because it remains limited to the politico-economic domain and does not touch religious ideology (Dumont 1970: 228) also does not hold up against our ethnography. We have shown that it is rather economic dependence and political dominance that appear to shape the nature of the way in which caste is reproduced in social life. Where economic dependencies, backed up by political power, remain strong, caste continues to pervade all spheres of life, including the everyday interactions in the village tea shop. However, where Dalits manage to escape their reliance on high-caste landlords and to access independent sources of employment outside the village, they gain in self-esteem and caste rapidly begins to lose its wider relevance within the village.

Indeed, it is the changing politico-economic fabric of the village and the region that seems crucial to the direction in which caste relations are being transformed: towards the reproduction of dependence and hierarchy, or towards the rapid transformation of dependence into separation and autonomy (and there are no doubt many other possible trajectories). In some contexts, as Jeffrey (2001) has also pointed out for western UP in the 1990s, the idea of the dominant caste certainly still carries some weight and economic dependencies persist. In other places, however, Dalits are gaining access to new sources of livelihood that offer them an unprecedented independence, similar to what Mendelsohn (1993) observed in parts of rural Rajasthan in the mid-1980s. Only an analytical approach that focuses on the changing political economy of the region and that remains sensitive to the social geography of caste relations can begin to explain the shifting rural landscapes of caste in contemporary India.

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