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Dalit women becoming 'Housewives': lessons from the Tiruppur region,
1981/2 to 2008/9

Judith Heyer

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Abstract

The paper suggests that while the decision of Dalit women to become 'housewives', rather than to engage in paid employment or self-employment, might be seen as a retreat into more strongly patriarchal relationships, it might equally be seen as a sign of strength in communities emerging from extreme poverty. The paper examines changes in a Dalit community in western Tamil Nadu over the 1980s, 1990s and the early 2000s to explore this issue. An increasing number of young Dalit women have become 'housewives' over this period. At the same time there has also been a very dramatic fall in child labour. Virtually all Dalit children are now in school. The fact that Dalit women have been withdrawing from the paid labour force has to be seen in a context in which, for women, opportunities for paid labour are still extremely limited. Opportunities for men have improved enormously; opportunities for women much less so. Women are now in a better position than they were, however, relying on the much improved incomes of men. Better sources of income need to be available to women if they are to get more independence than this.

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This paper looks at the changing position of Dalit women in villages in the Tiruppur region in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. This was a period during which the region was going through a process of industrialisation spreading into the rural as well as the urban areas. Garment manufacturing, knitwear, was at the heart of this, but other textiles, engineering, plastics, metalworking and other light industries also played a part. The industrialisation was relatively decentralised and relatively small-scale. The area was known earlier for its highly commercialised agriculture, which was based on an oppressive system of exploitation of Dalit labour (Heyer, 2000). It relied on the over-exploitation of groundwater, and there was a growing water shortage that came to a head in the mid-1980s. The water shortage, together with labour costs that rose as agriculture competed with industry for labour, among other things,¹ led to a fall in agricultural employment. The growth of industry, and the declining role of agriculture, were associated with a general rise in incomes, for labour as well as for capital.

A whole range of state welfare programmes were gradually put in place over the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, contributing to rising standards of living particularly among the poor. These programmes included increased spending on education and health, the provision of subsidised food and other essential commodities, mid-day meals, maternity benefits, pensions and accident benefits, Dalit housing, and latterly the NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme). Tamil Nadu had a particularly strong record with regard to state welfare provision, increasing its spending on welfare throughout the period of neo-liberal economic reform (Heyer, 2010c).

The paper uses 1981/2, 1996 and 2008/9 data to look at what happened to Dalits in villages in the region in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. In 1981/2 the villages were still predominantly agricultural and the agrarian structure was still strong. Virtually everyone in the villages was working in agriculture, or activities derivative of agriculture. By 1996, when the second major bout of fieldwork was undertaken, the industrialisation process was well under way. Significant numbers in the villages were working outside agriculture, many commuting to work elsewhere. By 2008/9, when the most recent fieldwork was conducted, the process had gone much further than in 1996.

This paper focuses on the changing position of Dalit women in this process of rural industrialisation. Theory would lead us to expect that Dalits would have benefited significantly from changes breaking down the old agrarian structure, and leading to a movement into non-agricultural employment outside the villages. In practice the old agrarian structure did loosen its grip, though not nearly as much as might have been expected (Heyer, 2000; 2010a). Moreover, members of Dalit communities moved much more slowly out of agriculture than members of non-Dalit communities. The old hierarchies remained very substantially in place in the midst of all the change.

The paper looks at the changing position of Dalit women through changes in their patterns of work between 1981/2 and 1996, and between 1996 and 2008/9. In 1981/2 Dalit women were putting in long hours of work for very low pay: they could not manage their households on the earnings of their husbands (and/or sons) alone. They

¹ Withdrawal of state support for agriculture played a part too (Government of India, 2005 Government of India, 2007; Heyer, 2010c).

had the double burden of paid work outside the household as well as all the domestic work within. They suffered from exploitation both inside and outside the household, and the two sources of exploitation reinforced each other. Far from employment outside the household strengthening their position within the household, it weakened it. Their outside employment was too arduous and poorly paid.

As Dalits became better off, in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, Dalit women no longer had to put in long hours for low pay at the most vulnerable stages of their lives. In 1981/2 Dalit women bemoaned the fact that they had to send their children out to work because they were burnt out by the time their children were old enough earn. By 2008/9 the pattern of withdrawal from paid work was quite different – Dalit women were withdrawing in connection with pregnancy and childbirth, and to look after their children when they were young. They were going back to paid work and/or doing more paid work when their children were older and in school. Many were stopping paid work earlier in old age too.

This paper sees Dalit women's withdrawal from paid work at crucial stages in their lives as a positive step in a particular context. This goes against the grain of a lot of feminist writing in which anything that increases the dependence of women on their husbands and/or others within their households is seen as regressive. This paper uses empirical evidence to argue that such a step may represent progress when women are emerging from extreme poverty and not yet able to get the kind of employment or other income earning opportunities that would strengthen their position within the household. This is a situation in which large numbers of women in poor countries still find themselves.

The paper proceeds first by introducing the villages and the data. It then looks at the way in which Dalit women's patterns of work changed between 1981/2 and 1996, and between 1996 and 2008/9. This is followed by a discussion of these changes.

I. The villages and the data

The 1981/2 data come from interviews with members of a 20% sample of households in 7 hamlets in 2 revenue villages in 1981/2.² The villages were known in 1981/2 for the strength of their agriculture and for being relatively 'remote' i.e. not on a main road. The 1996 data were collected from the descendants of the 1981/2 sample households still resident in the villages in 1996 (Heyer, 2010a). The 2008/9 data were collected from a newly selected 20% sample of households in the same hamlets and revenue villages, as part of a project on the effects of the expansion of the garment industry in the Tiruppur region.³ In addition to collecting systematic data from the sample households I conducted a large number of in depth interviews with selected individuals in 1981/2, 1996 and 2008/9. I also did a number of additional interviews on particular topics in 2003, 2004 and early 2010.

² I did a large number of the interviews, with the help of Dr. V. Mohanasundaram who acted as my interpreter most of the time. M. Srinivas, Paul Pandian, Selva Murugan, Arul Maran and Gowri Shankar were my main research assistants who also interpreted for me on occasion. They did interviews on their own as well.

³ The 2008/9 project was funded by a DFID-ESRC Research Award (RES-167-25-0296). Grace Carswell, Geert De Neve and M. Vijayabaskar were the other participants in the project.

The study villages are 20-30 km north east of Tiruppur, and 50-60 km north of Coimbatore. Tiruppur is the centre of the knitwear industry that has been very dynamic since the mid 1980s. Coimbatore is the older industrial centre that used to be known for its large textile mills and is now dominated by engineering and other industries as well as hospitals, colleges, software units, et al.

In the early 1980s the elite in the study villages were small-scale Gounder, Naidu and Chettiar agriculturalists running commercialised operations that were extremely profitable. Gounders, Naidus and Chettiars made up 56% of the households in the study villages and they owned 92% of the land (Heyer 2000; 2010a). The majority of agricultural labourers, most of them landless,⁴ came from 2 main Dalit⁵ communities – Arunthathiyars and Pannadis.⁶ They made up 30% of the households and owned 1% of the land. Other caste groups were represented in small numbers. They included a few small and marginal farmers and a number in services and trade. Dalits were seriously stigmatised and subject to discrimination in 1981/2. Untouchability practises were still very strong (Heyer, 2000; 2010a).

In 1996 the proportion of Dalits had risen to 33%, but there had been very little change in distribution of ownership of land (Heyer, 2010a). Untouchability practices were beginning to be contested by Ambedkar People's Movement units set up in the early 1990s in the study villages (Heyer, 2000; 2010a). By 2008/9 Dalits made up 40% of the population as non-Dalits had moved out in much greater numbers than Dalits. The Dalit population had hardly changed between 1996 and 2008/9 (Heyer, 2010b). In 2008/9 untouchability practices were still very much in place, but they were less strong than they had been in 1996 and 1981/2.

II. 1981/2 to 1996

In 1981/2, when fieldwork was first undertaken in these villages, more than 80% of the working population was engaged in agriculture (Heyer, 2000; 2010a). There had been some migration connecting people in the villages with people living elsewhere but there was virtually no commuting. A relatively successful, confident community of Naidu, Gounder and Chettiar thottam farmers⁷ employed large numbers of labourers working long hours on terms and conditions that were harsh. A wide range of commercial crops were grown including cotton on well-irrigated land, and cholam and groundnuts on rainfed land. Virtually all of the members of the two main Dalit groups were agricultural labourers. Arunthathiyars were heavily involved in the tied labour (pannayaal) system, in close relationships with thottam farmers and part of a strongly enforced system of discrimination and untouchability in the villages at large. There was very little migration, either temporary or permanent, where Arunthathiyars were concerned. Pannadis, the other main Dalit group, worked as migrant sugar cane crushers all over Coimbatore district, as well as as casual labourers in the villages.

⁴ Apart from house sites which they owned.

⁵ The category 'Dalit' is used in much of this paper to refer only to the two main labourer groups, Arunthathiyars and Pannadis, and excludes the small number of Dalits in trade and service households.

⁶ Arunthathiyars, otherwise known as Madaris, Chakkiliyars, et al. are generally regarded as the lowest status of the three largest Dalit groups in Tamil Nadu. Pannadis, otherwise known as Devendras, are Pallars, the highest status of the three largest Dalit groups.

⁷ Thottam farmers were farmers with enough well-irrigated land to employ permanent labourers at the time.

This gave them more independence from the village elite and substantial connections to the outside world. There were non-Dalit agricultural labourers too, as well as small farmers, and members of other castes in trade and service occupations.

In 1981/2 the village agricultural elite still dominated economic, social and political relationships to a very significant degree. The state was very much on the side of the agrarian elite (Heyer, 2000, 2010). Few state programmes were reaching Dalits at the time. Dalits' main access to the state was indirect, through the agrarian elite.

The vast majority of Dalit men in the two main Dalit labourer groups in the study villages were working as agricultural labourers in 1981/2. The majority of Dalit women worked as agricultural labourers too,⁸ taking very little time off for pregnancy, childbirth, or to look after children who were young. In 1981/2 some Dalit families were still very large – there were 9-10 surviving children in several cases in the sample. Others were small as the infant and child mortality rates were still high. Once their children were old enough to go out to work, Dalit women withdrew to some extent from paid work, doing fewer days per week than before. Only a few stopped paid work altogether though. Very few Dalit women described themselves as 'staying at home' in 1981/2, unless they were incapacitated in some way. They were too poor to do this. The sheer drudgery of their lives was very striking at the time.

Many Dalit children also went out to work in 1981/2. Fifty percent of Dalit boys between the ages of 5 and 14 years were either herding livestock (a minority)⁹ or working as agricultural labourers. Many were pannayals. Many Dalit girls were going out to work too. Less than 5% of 5-14 year old Dalit girls, and 10-15% of 5-14 year old Dalit boys, were in school. Dalit parents did not think that school was valuable at that stage. Many thought that it would spoil their children for agricultural labour too. Sending children out to work did not always bring in much income. It did not do much more than cover their costs when they were young. As they got older children did bring in some income though.

Dalits lived in colonies that were overcrowded, with poor facilities, and squalid public space, in 1981/2. The majority of their houses were constructed of mud and wattle and thatch. A few, financed either by employers, or in a very few cases by the state, had brick walls and tiled roofs. Dalits suffered from severe caste discrimination in 1981/2 including restrictions on the use of facilities and space in the main villages outside the colonies (Heyer, 2000; 2010a).

In 1996 agriculture was no longer nearly as dominant as it had been in 1981/2. Industry had expanded, reaching out into the countryside. Transport and communications had made it possible to commute to industrial and other non-agricultural work. A substantial proportion of the male labour force was now employed outside agriculture, large numbers commuting to work outside the villages. There had been a general increase in incomes. The proportion of Dalits working outside the villages was much smaller than the proportion of non-Dalits though (Heyer, 2010a). There had been a general increase in state services and programmes. Thottam farmers were no longer as dominant as they had been in 1981/2. The

⁸ Many were obliged to work for the employers of their husbands, or at least give them the first option on their labour in 1981/2.

⁹ There were relatively few livestock in these Dalit communities.

majority of Dalits were still agricultural labourers, but they were employed on much better terms than before.

Table 1 shows the occupational distributions of male and female Dalits and non-Dalits in 1996 and 2008/9, domestic and non-domestic. There are a number of points to note about the table. Firstly, there are significantly more men than women. There may have been some under-enumeration of women, but there is undoubtedly a real deficit here too (Heyer, 1992). The fact that this appears to have increased between 1996 and 2008/9, particularly where non-Dalits are concerned, is a subject for further investigation. It is not covered in this paper. A second point to note about the table is that there was very substantial outmigration among non-Dalits between 1996 and 2008/9. The numbers of non-Dalits living in the villages fell very considerably between 1996 and 2008/9. There was a slight increase in the number of Dalits, though this was less than the natural rate of growth of population. There was a small amount of outmigration of Dalits too.

In Table 1 non-domestic activities are divided into agricultural and non-agricultural. There are then two categories of domestic activity: 'housewives' and people 'staying at home'. These are discussed further below. The workforce, or total number of workers, is defined here to include both those involved in non-domestic activities and 'housewives' and those 'staying at home'.

Sixty five percent of Dalit men in the workforce were still working as agricultural labourers in 1996 (Table 1), for wages that were 2-3 times as high in real terms than they had been in 1981/2.¹⁰ This contrasts with over 90% in 1981/2. Significant numbers of other Dalit men were working outside agriculture unlike in 1981/2. There was only one Dalit man undertaking agriculture on own account. Dalits still had very little land in 1996, and very little livestock (Heyer, 2010a). Seventy four percent of Dalit women in the workforce were still working as agricultural labourers in 1996, receiving on average 50% of the wages of men.¹¹ A very small number of Dalit women in the sample were working outside agriculture in 1996 (in construction, in a powerloom unit, and as an assistant in a workshop). Nine percent of Dalit women in the workforce described themselves as 'housewives', and 13% described themselves as 'staying at home'.

Women were described as 'housewives' in 1996 if they were married women only doing work that was regarded as 'domestic'. 'Housewife' was a term that was not in use at all with respect to people in these villages in 1981/2. Women in similar positions who were not yet married were described as 'staying at home'. Many older women were described as 'staying at home' too. The 9% of Dalit women describing themselves as 'housewives' in 1996 compares with 14% of non-Dalit women. If one adds the numbers described as 'staying at home' the combined proportions increase to 22% for Dalits, and 29% for non-Dalits. What is significant is that being 'housewives'

¹⁰ Daily agricultural wages for men were Rs. 5/-, Rs.6/- and Rs.7/- in 1981/2. In 1996 they were Rs. 40/-, Rs. 45/-, Rs. 50/-. This represents an up to 200% increase using the Coimbatore rural rice price, and up to 175% using the CPIAL. (The India Labour Journal is the source both for the rice price and for the CPIAL.) This overstates the real rise though. There are a number of items of increased expenditure that are not included in the CPIAL, including things like health care et al. Patterns of expenditure have changed much more dramatically in Tamil Nadu than in other parts of India, many new items being regarded as necessities which they certainly were not before.

¹¹ This was an improvement on 1981/2 when Dalit women's wages were nearer to 40% of men's.

or ‘staying at home’ was an option for Dalits in 1996, unlike in 1981/2. This was an option that was discussed in very positive terms too. One woman with young children spoke proudly of being able to look after the children properly until they went to school. Others spoke of not having the double burden of work. A number of Dalit men supporting the change said that they liked their wives staying at home, ‘to cook proper meals’, et al.

There was much less child labour in 1996 than there had been in 1981/2. Only 25% of boys aged 5 to 14 were still herding or going out to work, and only 5% of girls. Fifty percent of 5-14 year old Dalit boys and 65% of 5-14 year old Dalit girls were in school. This was an enormous change over 1981/2. There had been an expansion in state funding for education. Initiatives like free school meals, and free school uniforms and books, had helped as well. It was significant that households had been able to accommodate the loss of income associated with no longer sending their children out to work and sending them to school instead, while still remaining better off with respect to consumer goods, clothing, utensils, et al. This is not so surprising if one takes into account the 2-3-fold increase in daily wages in agriculture, though the increase in earnings was less as days worked were fewer in 1996 than in 1981/2.

There had been a decline in fertility rates, spreading from non-Dalit to Dalit women as well. By 1996, the numbers of surviving children per couple had declined significantly both among Dalits and among non-Dalits. The majority of Dalit couples in the sample had 3-6 surviving children (with a mode of 4) in 1981/2, and 1-5 (with a mode of 3) in 1996.¹² Having fewer pregnancies, and fewer children to bring up, was one of many factors contributing to improvements in women’s health and wellbeing over time.

Dalit colonies also improved significantly between 1981/2 and 1996 (Heyer, 2010c). New colonies were being planned in 1981/2. Several were up and running in 1996. The new colonies were more spacious and the houses were constructed out of better quality materials. There was also provision for individual electricity connections. There was considerably more public space, and there were improved public services including water, street lighting, et al. The better quality housing and improved services had a major impact on Dalit lives, particularly those of Dalit women and children who spent so much more time in the colonies than men.

A number of other state policies introduced in the 1980s had strengthened the position of women (and children) in the villages too. The ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) centred on *anganwadis*¹³ provided support and supplementary feeding to pregnant women and children, together with crèche facilities for 3-5-year olds. Maternity benefits helped too, as did the noon, later mid-day, meals programme in schools.¹⁴ There were pensions for widows, and deserted wives, and although weak implementation meant that the coverage was only partial, these sent valuable signals too. The PDS (public distribution system) which was a flagship scheme in Tamil

¹² The numbers quoted here, for households in the survey, are only indicative of declining fertility rates. They are for surviving children only and include children born some time ago as well as children born more recently.

¹³ *Anganwadis* were centres providing these services.

¹⁴ The ‘Chief Minister’s nutritious noon-meals scheme’ for children in schools was introduced in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu in 1984. This was an early pre-cursor of the mid-day meals scheme that was introduced at the national level in the early 2000s.

Nadu provided subsidised food and essential commodities. This was already in place in a limited form in 1981/2. It had expanded substantially by 1996. (Government of India, 2005; Heyer, 2010c).

To summarise: Significant numbers of Dalit women were ‘staying at home’, being ‘housewives’, at some of the most vulnerable stages of their lives in 1996, unlike in 1981/2. This was still a small minority though. More important, in 1996, were better incomes, better living conditions, and fewer children, less child labour, et al. The next generation of girls were getting a much better start than their mothers in the generation before.

III. 1996 to 2008/9

By 2008/9 there had been a continuation of many of the trends seen in 1996. More Dalit men were now in better quality non-agricultural occupations, and more Dalit women were in non-agricultural occupations too. Dalits were beginning to get a voice through the revitalised PRIs (panchayati raj institutions) (see below). More Dalit children were getting further in school. Child labour had virtually disappeared.

The majority of Dalit men were still agricultural labourers (Table 1), albeit working fewer hours for higher wages than in 1996.¹⁵ Work was less regular though, and sometimes combined with construction when there was not enough work in agriculture. A smaller proportion of Dalit women were working as agricultural labourers though. Moreover the male/female wage gap had increased again between 1996 and 2008/9. The proportion of men engaged in non-agricultural occupations had barely changed between 1996 and 2008/9. What had changed was that more were engaged in manufacturing and less in trade and services, many of which were very low income activities in 1996. There had been a further expansion of state welfare programmes reaching Dalits. The new PRI's (Panchayat Raj Institutions) were significant too. The SHGs (Self-Help Groups) were much less so (see below).

By 2008/9 16% of Dalit men in the labour force and 8% of Dalit women in the labour force were working in the garment sector. These were all young – Dalits had only entered in significant numbers relatively recently. The average age of non-Dalits in the garment sector was young too, but there were some older non-Dalits working in the garment sector as well. Dalit women working in the garment sector were all young and unmarried.¹⁶ Whereas virtually all the Dalit women working outside agriculture were working in the garment sector in 2008/9, Dalit men were also working in powerloom units, and in a range of other non-agricultural occupations - petty trade, construction, spinning mills, engineering, low level government, et al.

There were more ‘housewives’ in 2008/9. Whereas in 1996 only 9% of Dalit women in the workforce had described themselves as housewives, the proportion in 2008/9 was 26%. Meanwhile, the proportion of non-Dalit women describing themselves as housewives in 2008/9 had risen to 38%. If one adds those describing themselves as ‘staying at home’ the proportions rise to 35% (Dalit) and 53% (non-Dalit). These are very significant increases over the proportions in 1996.

¹⁵ Agricultural wages increased by roughly 20% in real terms between 1996 and 2008/9. The CPIAL is used as a deflator here. The increase was much lower than the increase between 1981/2 and 1996.

¹⁶ Contrary to De Neve (2010)'s account of the involvement of women in garment production in Tiruppur town.

The 2008/9 distributions of female occupations shown by age group in Table 2 are interesting. It was difficult to get reliable data on ages, but the distributions are revealing nevertheless. In the 15<30 age group the proportion of Dalit women describing themselves as housewives was high and comparable to that of non-Dalits in older age groups. The proportion fell dramatically in the 30<45 age group which included women whose children were no longer young. A very substantial proportion in that age group were agricultural labourers. This was not the case for non-Dalits, among whom the proportions of housewives in higher age groups remained high. It is also significant that the proportion of women aged 60 and over who were working outside the home was much higher among Dalits (35%) than among non-Dalits (19%). Non-Dalits in this age group were engaged in easier occupations too. Overall there had been a huge improvement since 1996. Dalits were still far behind non-Dalits though.

There was virtually no child labour in the study villages in 2008/9. Virtually all Dalit children from 5 to 14 years were in school, the majority completing secondary as well as primary. The quality of state school education had improved enormously. The fact that many non-Dalit children were in private schools gave Dalits a stronger role in state schools too. There were no Dalit children in private schools in 1996 or 2008/9. Untouchability was not practised in village schools in 2008/9. It had only been abolished relatively recently though.¹⁷ In 2008/9 some Dalits were continuing beyond SSLC. There were none who had got anywhere near this in 1981/2, and only the odd one or two in 1996. The post-SSLC qualifications which Dalits had either embarked on or had completed included Plus 2, Teacher training, a BA/BCom degree, and a law degree. There were real possibilities of upward mobility here. Reservations that gave Dalits preferential access to government employment made post-SSLC qualifications attractive, enabling them to go on to apply for government employment in schools and elsewhere.

Fertility rates had come down further – the majority of Dalits had 1-3 surviving children, with a mode of 2 in 2008/9. The distributions were more concentrated among non-Dalits but the concentrations were increasing among Dalits too. New norms were being established together with new levels of control.

There were more Dalit housing colonies in 2008/9 and still more were being planned. There seemed to be an insatiable demand, confirming quite how crowded Dalit colonies had been earlier, and still were. The new Dalit housing developments changed the face of the countryside as Dalits became more visible, and acquired more public as well as private space. The colonies were cleaner, healthier, and more spacious in 2008/9 than they had been in 1996, and quite unrecognisable compared with what they had been in 1981/2.

The revived village panchayats that had already been in place for some time by 2008/9, with their systems of reservations for Dalit women and for Dalit men (and for non-Dalit women), were established following elections in October 1996. These made a substantial difference to the position of Dalits, raising their visibility, and enabling them to make themselves heard. In one of the two revenue villages in the study the panchayat presidency was reserved for a Dalit woman from 1996-2006. In the other it was reserved for a Dalit woman from 2006 on. The Panchayat Union councillorship

¹⁷ The Ambedkar People's Movement had got separate seating, and separate drinking vessels in schools abolished in 1998. Other forms of discrimination and untouchability went more slowly though.

was also held by Dalit women from the study villages from 1996-2006. Husbands and brothers supported these women, and acted for them on many occasions, but the women were active in their own right too. The legacy in the village in which the presidency was reserved for a Dalit woman from 1996-2006 is that Dalits are more confident in their dealings with outsiders, and somewhat more assertive in their dealings with non-Dalits in the villages too. It is the husbands of Dalit representatives who have reaped the most significant benefits from these periods in office though, one in particular becoming a real estate commission agent after 2006. Two of the four women who had held panchayat positions in the study villages between 1996 and 2006 were agricultural labourers again in 2008/9. One of the others had moved with her husband to a nearby town. Increased representation had not led to the abolition of untouchability practices though. Hotels and tea-shops still practised the 2-tumbler system,¹⁸ and there were strict rules about where Dalits sat and moved.

Women's SHGs, designed to inculcate savings habits, regular attendance at and running of meetings, and access to credit, were actively promoted in the study villages in 2000/2001 when a local NGO received state funding to start a number of groups, including several consisting only of Dalit women. The NGO funding was not sustained however and the situation soon lapsed into a pattern in which groups came and went, none continuing for long enough to build up to anything very substantial. SHGs which might have been expected to contribute to Dalit women's self-employment opportunities were not doing this in the study villages in 2008/9.¹⁹

The coverage of the ICDS, maternity benefits, pensions, et al. had increased by 2008/9. The first health centre had been established in one of the study villages too. This had been a longstanding demand at least since 1981/2 when people commented on the fact that veterinary services were better and more accessible than health services were. Having a health centre in the village was particularly valuable for Dalits who had difficulty accessing health facilities further away. The PDS had expanded further, to include more commodities, and higher subsidies. In 2008/9 people commented on the impact it was having on the amount of paid work done by both women and men.²⁰

The NREGS is the most recent development holding out promise for Dalit women. There were earlier employment generation programmes but none as comprehensive or as potentially suitable for Dalit women as this. The NREGS was introduced in the study villages in 2008. In late 2009 and early 2010, after rather a slow start, it was attracting 50-60 people per day in one revenue village, and more than 70 in the other at some times of year.²¹ The uptake was almost exclusively female. The wages were

¹⁸ The two tumbler system in which separate drinking vessels are kept for Dalits who often also have to wash their tumblers before returning them to the shelf in the tea-shop or hotel has been the subject of protest in many parts of Tamil Nadu. The system had been abolished in one of the neighbouring villages to the study villages but Dalits in the study villages said that they had not been able to get them abolished here. A number of these tea-shops had been fined by the state for continuing the practice, and re-introduced the practice shortly after paying the fine.

¹⁹ SHGs have been doing this in other parts of Tamil Nadu though (add refs.)

²⁰ Agricultural labourers discussing the number of days per week that they went out to work said that what was available in 2008/9 under the PDS meant that they only had to do 1-2 days per week to feed their families, as opposed to the 5-6 that had been necessary earlier.

²¹ As confirmed on a brief re-visit in January 2010.

not high enough to attract men. In one of the study villages all beneficiaries were Dalits, and most were Pannadis, not Arunthathiyars, from one of the two Pannadi colonies only. In the other village members of other castes were among the beneficiaries too. People working on the scheme were entitled to 100 days of employment per household per year at a daily wage of Rs.80/-. (This was raised to Rs.100/- on 1 January 2010.) NREGS work was regarded as less arduous than agricultural labour. The hours were similar – 6 hours of work with 1 hour off for lunch. It was a preferred option for some, but the demand was not as high as might have been expected. It was hard to tell how much this had to do with the administration, and how much it was a question of lack of interest on the part of potential beneficiaries who would not have wanted the work even if it were available. Subsequent information suggests that there has been some rotation – Arunthathiyars now getting their turn. This suggests that the NREGS is not a dependable source of employment and income. Rather it is a bonus when your turn comes round instead.

Some of the points that have been established so far are that:

1. there has been a general rise in income and diversification of occupations for men;
2. there has been a decrease in participation in the workforce coupled with less diversification of occupations for women;
3. there has been an increase in state welfare interventions;
4. child labour has been virtually eliminated;
5. there has been a substantial rise in Dalit participation in education.

Dalits were still very much at the bottom of the hierarchy though. They were still subject to significant stigmatisation and discrimination. Moreover, the majority were still deemed to be BPL (Below the Poverty Line) in 2008/9.

IV. Discussion

There had been a general improvement in the position of Dalits in a process of industrialisation combined with strong state welfarist support that generated increased incomes and earnings (Heyer 2010c). Dalit men benefited much more directly than women from the improved employment opportunities though. Dalit women benefited from a reduced burden of paid work of as men earned more. They benefited from some reduction in the domestic burden too as support from the state increased. Dalits were still at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy too.

Dalit women were still burdened by patriarchal relations within the household which meant that they shouldered the bulk of the domestic work. Dalit women were still earning less than half of what men were earning as agricultural labourers too. There had been very little increase in the availability of work for women that was reasonably paid. The only exception was the few years of work in the garment industry for young unmarried women without domestic responsibilities.

It did not look as if industrialisation was providing Dalits with an escape route from an oppressive agrarian structure. It was non-Dalits who moved out more than Dalits

here. The majority of Dalits were still stuck in an agrarian structure that was oppressive if not quite as oppressive as before (Heyer, 2000, 2010a). Dalits still suffered from stigmatisation and discrimination in the villages, and though they suffered less outside stigmatisation and discrimination did not disappear even there.

The garment sector did not look as if it was providing Dalit women with increased opportunities either – apart from the small number of young unmarried girls who would do this for a few years early in their lives.

The most significant benefits to Dalits coming from the industrialisation process were the improved terms and conditions of agricultural employment in which the majority of them remained, with much better terms and conditions than earlier, though work was more irregular and further afield too, supplemented in some cases by construction work also relatively far away. There had been significant benefits as far as Dalits were concerned from the state welfare programmes too.

It was certainly a step forward for Dalit women not to be doing so much work outside the household that was associated with drudgery and low pay. Their bargaining power within the household was increased by no longer being so overworked and poorly paid. What they really needed though was better paid work too. That would increase their bargaining power within the household even more. It is significant that all the improvements in the local economy have not included this. Not much homework was reaching people in these villages, and what there was was very poorly paid. There was not enough support for developing alternative sources of employment or self-employment through SHGs et al. There was not much in all this for women except as dependents of men who were doing better than before. The position of widows and deserted or separated wives brings this home particularly strongly. They suffer acutely from the lack of reasonable sources of income for women here.

The bottom line in this case is that while there have been real improvements in the lives of women as well as men in these Dalit communities, what is very unsatisfactory is that better independent sources of income have not materialised for women. One can focus on the general improvement in material wellbeing in the area, for Dalits as well as non-Dalits, and the fact that a lot of state welfare programmes benefit women as much as men. What is not usually focused on, however, is the fact that it ought to have been possible to develop better independent sources of income for women as well as men. This is particularly so given the labour shortage that is talked about so much ... what about developing work regimes that would allow women to participate as substantially as men? But also, what about better supported SHG et al. programmes? As long as women continue to shoulder the bulk of the burden of domestic work within the household they will not be able to participate on equal terms with men.

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Table 1:

col. %	All Males		All Females		Dalit Males		Dalit Females		Non-Dalit Ma	
	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	200
own agriculture	19	23	31	13	1	1			29	3
livestock keeping	3	2	4	4	2	1	2	3	3	2
agric labourer	28	30	31	25	65	66	74	53	8	8
garments	9	21	1	7	4	16		8	12	2
powerloom	3	2	1	0	4	4	1	0	2	1
other non-agric	31	17	7	5	18	7	2	1	37	2
all in non-domestic employment	92	94	73	54	94	95	78	65	91	9
housewife			12	34			9	26		
staying at home	8	6	14	12	6	5	13	9	9	6
all workers	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	10
total no. in sample	591	541	573	487	200	212	185	196	391	32

Source: Village surveys, 1996, 2008/9.

Table 2a: All females 2008/9

row %	young	at school	staying at home	housewives	garments	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	DK
0<5	100									
5<15		97	1		1					
15<30		26	4	31	15	21		1	1	
30<45			2	28	5	37	4	20	5	
45<60			1	36		21	8	21	11	1
60+			44	32		7	2	9	5	1
all	5	20	9	25	5	19	3	10	4	0

Table 2b: All Dalit females 2008/9

row %	young	at school	staying at home	housewives	garments	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	DK
0<5	100									
5<15		94	3		3					
15<30		12	2	37	15	32			2	
30<45			2	10	2	83	2			
45<60				29		64	7			
60+			43	17		26	9			4
all	6	20	7	19	6	39	2		1	1

Table 2c: All non-Dalit females 2008/9

row %	young	at school	staying at home	housewives	garments	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	DK
0<5	100									
5<15		100								
15<30		44	8	23	15	8		2		
30<45			1	39	6	9	5	33	8	
45<60			2	38		10	9	26	14	2
60+			44	37				12	7	
all	3	19	11	30	4	6	3	17	6	0

Source: Village survey 2008/9.