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

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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 benefiting women in a community 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 Dalit women became 'housewives' over this period. At the same time there was also a very dramatic fall in child labour. Virtually all Dalit children were in school in the early 2000s. The fact that Dalit women withdrew from the paid labour force has to be seen in a context in which, for women, opportunities for paid labour were still extremely limited. Opportunities for men had improved enormously; opportunities for women much less so. Women were in a better position in the early 2000s than they were in the early 1980s, however, benefiting from expanded state social policies, and relying on the much improved incomes of men. They need better sources of income of their own to get more independence next.

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Judith Heyer*

In much of South Asia, and elsewhere, women withdraw from work as incomes rise to increase the status of their households and the status of the communities of which they are a part. This withdrawal of women from the labour market as incomes rise is often associated with a deterioration in the position of women, involving an increase in the degree of their subordination within the household and a decrease in their autonomy. This may not always be the case however. In the case discussed in this paper women in poor households have been withdrawing from the labour market as incomes rise not because men have put pressure on them to do so, but because women themselves have chosen not to continue with work that is arduous, exploitative, and poorly paid – work that exposed them to double exploitation, outside the household as well as within.

A whole range of factors determine whether engagement in paid work is to women's advantage or not. In some contexts it is clear that it is. In others it is not. This paper looks at a group of Dalit women who have withdrawn from paid work in conditions in which engagement in paid employment did not appear to be associated with more autonomy, more control, and higher status within the household.¹ It was clear that their withdrawal was positively beneficial in many respects. The paper looks at the respects in which Dalit women benefited from withdrawing from paid work, and the circumstances in which this was so, bearing in mind the position taken in much of the feminist literature in which it is argued that withdrawing from paid work is generally detrimental where women are concerned.²

The focus of the paper is decreased participation in paid work by Dalit women in an area in which the income earning opportunities open to Dalit men have been increasing quite significantly.³ Dalit women have been taking on less paid work as Dalit men have been earning more. Dalit men have been able to access better quality

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¹ The research on which this paper is based did not focus directly on empowerment and autonomy however. Kabeer 2001 cautions us on the evidence establishing changes in empowerment and autonomy which has to be treated with care.

² Cf. Sen 1990 which still forms the basis of many such claims, and Kapadia 1995 making the case in a rural South Indian context in particular.

³ Opportunities for Dalit men have not improved nearly as much as those for non-Dalit men though (Heyer 2010a; 2011).

employment as agricultural labourers as well as better employment opportunities outside agriculture. Dalit women have been able to access much less well paid employment opportunities both as agricultural labourers and in non-agricultural work. It is in this context that the labour force participation rate of Dalit women has decreased and Dalit women have been taking on less paid work.

Taking on less paid work has not necessarily weakened the position of Dalit women within their households however. Earlier, the paid work they were doing was draining and associated with poor health and low energy levels. The fact that they had large numbers of children, and had difficulty provisioning their households, took its toll too. They were not in strong positions with respect to decision-making, and control over their own labour, within their households. Later, when they were doing less paid work, were in better health, had smaller numbers of children, and less difficulty provisioning their households, they appeared able to assert themselves within their households more than they could before, gaining more control over decision-making et al.⁴

Clearly it is often the case that a reduction in employment outside the household signifies a deterioration in the status of women, putting them back into a more patriarchal relationship within the household and reducing their autonomy.⁵ The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the link between reduced employment outside the household and a deterioration in the status of women relies on a whole range of conditions that do not always hold however.⁶ The quality of work outside the household is a key factor. If the work that women do outside the household is arduous, involves long hours and low pay, and involves relationships with employers that are exploitative in other ways too, women can be more empowered, more autonomous without it than with it. If, on the other hand, the work that they undertake outside the household is not too arduous, and involves reasonable hours, and reasonable pay, then the opposite may be true. It is not only the quality of work outside the household that is relevant however. Other factors are important too. One such in the context discussed in this paper is social policy: the availability of subsidised food; free school meals; maternity, accident and disability benefits; and pensions; have been important features in the context under discussion over the past decade or two. These factors have helped to limit the rise in the cost of living, and have reduced vulnerability, making it possible for women to manage without doing paid work. Another relevant factor is the change in social attitudes to the valuation of domestic work, particularly those associated with the increased importance attached to children, and children's education, which women's domestic work supports in important ways. Age related social norms, caste norms, and gender ideologies, so different in South from in North India, have played important roles in the context under discussion too.

The paper focuses on a specific context in which changes in male and female employment opportunities and changes in social policy have been associated with

⁴ See NityaRao 2011 for an example of research that pursues this issue in a locality nearby. Her paper explores the influence of women staying at home have over decision-making, comparing it with that of those doing paid work. Her data show some categories of women having more influence when not doing paid work, some less.

⁵ There is a large body of research showing this both in India and elsewhere.

⁶ This is well-trodden ground: cf. Geetha 2007; Kabear 1995; 2001; e.g.

changes in Dalit women's patterns of work. Labour force participation rates are one set of measures used to document this. These can be estimated from large-scale survey data, but the estimates are particularly unreliable where women are concerned.⁷ Women tend both to underestimate their contributions and to undervalue their work. When men report what women do this compounds the problem. Moreover, the degree of underestimation is not necessarily stable over time. Micro level studies give a better sense of the situation. Hence this paper uses micro level data on labour force participation rates of Dalit women among other things as a basis for discussion.

The context is western Tamil Nadu over the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Over this period, in the region concerned, Dalit women's participation in the labour force has been declining. This may be a phenomenon specific to Tamil Nadu whose combination of strong social policy and widespread urban and non-agricultural employment distinguish it from other states in India.⁸ Gender ideologies are also very different from those in North India. The decline in Dalit women's participation in the labour force may be a phenomenon found only in some parts of Tamil Nadu too. This paper looks at the role played by a combination of factors specific to the region concerned over the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, in Dalit women's changing patterns of work.

The paper focuses on the Tiruppur region in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Over much of this period the region was going through a process of industrialisation spreading into the rural as well as the urban areas. This was a region known earlier for its highly commercialised agriculture, based on an oppressive system of exploitation of Dalit labour (Heyer, 2000). Industrialisation centred on knitwear manufacturing. Other textiles, engineering, plastics, metalworking and other light industries also played a part. The industrialisation was relatively decentralised and relatively small-scale. The growth of industry was accompanied by a decline in agriculture. It was associated with a general rise in incomes, for labour as well as for capital.

A whole range of state welfare programmes gradually put in place over the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, also contributed 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 National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Tamil Nadu has had a particularly strong record with regard to state welfare provision, increasing its spending on welfare throughout the period of neo-liberal economic reform (Vijayabaskar 2011; Heyer 2010c).

The paper uses 1981/2, 1996 and 2008/9 data to look at the changing patterns of work of Dalit women in villages in the region. In 1981/2, when the first survey was conducted, 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, the year of the second survey, the industrialisation process was well under way. Significant numbers of men in the

⁷ Mencher (1996); Ghosh (2009); Deshpande (2011).

⁸ Female work participation rates have been declining generally in India according to the Government (Government of India 2010, cited in Rao 2011).

villages were working outside agriculture, many commuting to work elsewhere. By 2008/9, when the most recent survey was conducted, the numbers of men working outside agriculture had not changed, but more were working in manufacturing, less in trade and services. Significant numbers of women were working in manufacturing too.

One might have expected that Dalits would have benefited from changes that broke down the old agrarian structure and led 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). Members of Dalit communities moved much more slowly out of agriculture than members of non-Dalit communities. The old hierarchies remained in place in the midst of all the change.

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 suffered from exploitation both inside and outside the household, the two sources of exploitation reinforcing each other. The fact that they were drained by work outside the household meant that they were less able to stand up to their husbands at home; the fact that they were under pressure at home meant that they were less able to stand up to their employers too. Far from employment outside the household strengthening their position within the household, it weakened it. It was physically depleting and the income it brought in was very low. Their outside employment was too arduous and too poorly paid.

As Dalit households became better off, in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, Dalit women no longer had to put in long hours for low pay at some of the most vulnerable stages of their lives, through pregnancy and childbirth, and when their children were very young, as well as in old age. 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 to earn. Their work all through pregnancy and childbirth and when children were still very young had taken its toll. By 2008/9 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. It was significant that the kind of paid work in which they were involved, agricultural labour, meant that they could enter and leave the paid labour force and they could also choose how many days of paid labour they did per week.

The position taken in this paper is that Dalit women's withdrawal from paid work at crucial stages in their lives is a positive step given the poor quality of paid work available to them. It was a distinct improvement over the situation in which they had to put in all the work they could to make ends meet until they had children old enough to go out to work as well. As the earnings of their husbands increased, and state support limited the rise in the cost of provisioning their households, they no longer had to do this. It is also important to recognise, however, that women would have been much better off had they also had better quality sources of income themselves.

The paper proceeds by first 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, and the changing socio-economic environment that made

this possible. The paper concludes with a discussion of the inter-relationship between the different factors involved.

I. The villages and the data

The data on which the paper is based come from surveys conducted in 1981/2, 1996, and 2008/9, additional interviews done in conjunction with the surveys, and additional interviews in 2003, 2004, 2010 and 2011. The 1981/2 data come from interviews with members of a 20% sample of households in 7 hamlets in 2 revenue villages.⁹ 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 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.

The study villages are 20-30 km north east of Tiruppur, and 50-60 km north of Coimbatore. Tiruppur is the centre of a 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.

In the early 1980s the elite in the study villages were small-scale Gounder, Naidu and Chettiar agriculturalists running profitable commercialised operations. Members of these three groups made up 56% of the households in the study villages and owned 92% of the land (Heyer 2000; 2010a). The majority of agricultural labourers, most of them landless,¹⁰ came from two main Dalit¹¹ communities – Arunthathiyar and Pannadi.¹² They made up 30% of the households and owned 1% of the land. Other caste groups were represented in small numbers. They included small and marginal farmers and households involved in services and trade. Dalits were subject to serious stigmatisation and discrimination in 1981/2. Untouchability practices were still very strong (Heyer 2000; 2010a).

Women were very differently positioned in different castes in these villages. The majority of Dalit women worked as agricultural labourers in 1981/2. The majority of non-Dalit women contributed to household production, agriculture and a few services. A minority of non-Dalit women in poorer households worked as labourers as well.

In 1996 the proportion of Dalits in the village population had risen but they still owned only 1% of the land (Heyer 2010a). Dalits were more dominant in the

⁹ I did a large number of the 1981/2 interviews, with the help of Dr. V. Mohanasundaram who acted as my interpreter most of the time. In subsequent surveys M. Srinivas, Paul Pandian, SelvaMurugan, Arul Maran and Gowri Shankar also interpreted for me on occasion. They did interviews on their own as well.

¹⁰ Apart from house sites which they owned.

¹¹ The category 'Dalit' is used in much of this paper to refer to the two main labourer groups, Arunthathiyars and Pannadis, and excludes the small number of Dalits in trade and service households.

¹² 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, or Pallars, are generally regarded as the highest status of the three.

agricultural labour force with fewer non-Dalits working as agricultural labourers. Non-Dalits, and a few Dalits, had been entering non-agricultural occupations associated with industrialisation. The agrarian elite was no longer as dominant as before. By 2008/9 Dalits made up 40% of the household population as non-Dalits had moved out in greater numbers than Dalits (Heyer 2011). The majority of Dalits were still agricultural labourers, but more Dalits had been moving into manufacturing than before. Dalit women were now entering manufacturing in small numbers as well.

Significant numbers of Dalit women, and fewer non-Dalit women, still worked as agricultural labourers in 1996. The majority of non-Dalit women worked in household enterprises of various kinds. By 2008/9, some Dalit as well as non-Dalit women were working in manufacturing. The majority of Dalit women in productive employment were still agricultural labourers and the majority of Non-Dalit women were working in household enterprises still.

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). A relatively successful, confident community of Naidu, Gounder and Chettiar *thottam farmers*¹³ 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 rain-fed land. Virtually all of the members of the two main Dalit groups in the workforce were agricultural labourers. Arunthathiyars were heavily involved in the tied labour (*pannayal*) system, in close relationships with thottam farmers and subject to a strictly enforced system of discrimination and untouchability in the villages at large. Most Arunthathiyars lived in tight-knit households in which all members of the household were obliged to work for the employers of the household heads. 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 casual labourers in the villages. This gave them more independence from the village elite and substantial connections to the outside world. It also meant that many Pannadi women were used to managing their households on a day to day basis in the absence of the men. There were non-Dalit agricultural labourers too.

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

Nearly all Dalit men in the two main Dalit labourer groups in the study villages worked as agricultural labourers in 1981/2. The majority of Dalit women worked as agricultural labourers too, taking very little time off for pregnancy, childbirth, or to look after young children. The majority of Dalit women also did domestic work – buying food, fetching water, and firewood, cooking, cleaning, as well as looking after children, and the old, and the sick. Some Dalit families were still very large – there were nine or ten surviving children in several cases in the sample in 1981/2. Once

¹³ Thottam farmers were farmers with enough well-irrigated land to employ permanent labourers at the time.

their children were old enough to go out to work, Dalit women withdrew to some extent from paid work, doing fewer days per week. 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. The sheer drudgery of their lives was very striking at the time.

Child labour was the norm among Dalits in these villages in 1981/2. Fifty percent of Dalit boys between the ages of 5 and 14 years were either herding livestock for their own households (a minority)¹⁴ or working for others as agricultural labourers, most as pannayals. Many Dalit girls worked as casual agricultural labourers as well as doing domestic work. Less than 5% of 5-14 year old Dalit girls, and 10-15% of 5-14 year old Dalit boys, were in school. Sending children out to work did not do much more than cover their costs when they were young. As they got older the contribution that children made to the household budget rose, raising the opportunity cost of sending them to school.

Dalits lived in colonies that were overcrowded in 1981/2, with poor facilities, and squalid public space. 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. Water was a major problem. Dalit women had to rely on non-Dalit women to fill their water pots from the main village wells, some distance from their own homes. The caste discrimination from which Dalits suffered included restrictions on the use of facilities and space in the main villages outside the colonies in 1981/2 going way beyond restrictions relating to the drawing of water from the village well (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 and the development of transport and communications had made it possible to commute to industrial and other non-agricultural work. A substantial proportion of the male, but not female, labour force was employed outside agriculture, large numbers commuting to work outside the villages. The proportion of Dalits working outside the villages was much smaller than the proportion of non-Dalits though (Heyer 2010a). The majority of male and female Dalits were still agricultural labourers, employed on terms that were considerably better than before (see below). There had been a general increase in incomes, including those of agricultural labourer households. There had also been a general increase in state services and programmes.

The occupational distributions for male and female Dalits and non-Dalits in 1996 and 2008/9 are shown in Table 1. 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 difference here too.¹⁵ A second point to note about the table is the fall in the numbers of non-Dalits living in the villages. The increase in the number of Dalits was less than the natural rate of growth of population. There was a small amount of outmigration of Dalits too. There

¹⁴ There were relatively few livestock in these Dalit communities.

¹⁵ This was partly due to a continuing deficit of girls (Heyer 1992), and partly due to factors such as more old women remaining in the villages than old men.

were significant numbers of missing observations where women's occupations were concerned in 1996.¹⁶ The percentages that are reported remain valid though.

The workforce includes those involved in 'productive' activities, those involved in 'domestic' activities, and the small numbers of men describing themselves as unemployed. The labour force includes those involved in 'productive' activities and the unemployed. Labour force participation rates, the percentages of the total population in the labour force, were 53.5% for all women, 56.2% for Dalit women, and 52.4% for non-Dalit women. (The corresponding figures for men were 69.6%, 72.7% and 68.1% respectively.) The differences between Dalit and non-Dalit women's labour force participation rates are not as great as one might have expected. It has to be borne in mind however that what counted as labour force participation for non-Dalit women was primarily work in household production, whereas what counted as labour force participation for Dalit women was all agricultural labour and/or other waged work.

Sixty five percent of Dalit men in the workforce were still working as agricultural labourers in 1996 (Table 1), for wages that were two to three times as high in real terms than they had been in 1981/2.¹⁷ This contrasts with over 90% working as agricultural labourers in 1981/2. Significant numbers of Dalit men were also working outside agriculture in 1996, unlike in 1981/2. There was only one Dalit man in the sample engaged in own account agriculture in 1996.

Seventy four percent of Dalit women in the workforce were still working as agricultural labourers in 1996, receiving on average 50% of the wages received by men for casual labour.¹⁸ 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). The remaining 22% described themselves as 'housewives', 'staying at home', or 'not working'.

Women were described as 'housewives' in 1996 if they were married women only doing 'domestic' work. Older married women who were similarly placed described themselves as 'not working'. Unmarried women described themselves as 'staying at home'. All of these women would normally be involved in domestic work, including such things as fetching water, and firewood, washing clothes, buying food, cooking, cleaning and looking after children as well as the old and the sick. The 22% of Dalit women describing themselves as 'housewives', 'staying at home' or 'not working' in 1996 compares with 29% of non-Dalit women. It is significant that being 'housewives' was an option for Dalits in 1996, unlike in 1981/2. This option was

¹⁶ 17% in the case of Dalits, and 8% in the case of non-Dalits.

¹⁷ 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 consumer price index for agricultural labourers (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.

¹⁸ This might have been seen as an improvement on 1981/2 when Dalit women's wages were nearer to 40% of men's, but men were also doing contract labour in 1996. This meant that their average wages were higher than the daily wage figures suggest. The gender disparity in the agricultural labour market may not have changed at all.

discussed in positive terms too. Women 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 said that they liked their wives staying at home too, 'to cook proper meals' among other things. The domestic labour that was a major part of Dalit women's lives was in some ways easier, in some ways more demanding, than it had been earlier. Access to water was easier and there was less difficulty procuring food, but standards were higher - there were more clothes to be washed, and food was more elaborate, for example.

Also significant as far as women were concerned was the decline in fertility rates. By 1996, the numbers of surviving children per couple had declined substantially both among Dalits and among non-Dalits.¹⁹ Having fewer pregnancies, and fewer children to bring up, also contributed to improvements in Dalit women's health and well-being over time.

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. 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 still remain better off with respect to consumer goods, clothing and utensils. What made this possible was the two- to three-fold increase in daily wages in agriculture, even though the increase in earnings was less as days worked were fewer in 1996 than in 1981/2.

Dalit colonies also improved between 1981/2 and 1996 (Heyer 2010a). New colonies were being planned in 1981/2 and these were up and running in 1996. They 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 and street lighting. 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 Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) provided support and supplementary feeding to pregnant women and children, together with crèche facilities for three- to five-year olds which some but not all were able to take up. Maternity benefits helped too, as did the noon, later mid-day, meals scheme in schools.²⁰ 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 public distribution system (PDS) which was a flagship scheme in Tamil Nadu provided subsidised food and essential commodities. This was

¹⁹ 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. These numbers 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.

²⁰ 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.

already in place in a limited form in 1981/2. It had expanded substantially by 1996 significantly reducing the difficulty for Dalit women of provisioning their households. (Government of India 2005; Heyer 2010c).

To summarise: Significant numbers of Dalit women were ‘staying at home’, ‘not working’, and/or being ‘housewives’, at some of the most vulnerable stages of their lives in 1996, unlike in 1981/2. As important, in 1996, were higher incomes, better living conditions, and fewer children. It was also very significant that there was less child labour. The next generation of children were getting a much better start than their parents in the previous generation.

III. 1996 to 2008/9

In 2008/9 similar numbers of Dalit men were still working as agricultural labourers albeit earning higher wages than before, and there were still only one or two engaged in own account agriculture. However more of those working outside agriculture were in manufacturing, less in trade and services. More Dalit women were working in manufacturing too. There had been a further rise in incomes since 1996, but this was not as great as that between 1981/2 and 1996 when the village economy first became integrated into the regional economy. There had also been a further expansion of social policies benefiting Dalits. Dalits were getting a voice through the revitalised panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) as well (see below).

Labour force participation rates had fallen very significantly, from 53.5% to 41.0% for all women; from 56.2% to 47.7% for Dalit women; and from 52.4% to 36.6% for non-Dalit women. Dalit women’s labour force participation rates were now well below those recorded by non-Dalit women in 1996. (Male labour force participation rates had also fallen, but not as much: from 69.6% to 66.3% for all men; from 72.7% to 65.9% for Dalit men; and from 68.1% to 66.6% for non-Dalit men.) One of the main reasons for the fall in labour force participation rates was that more were in education for longer. Another, particularly in the case of women, was that fewer were involved in ‘productive’ work.

The majority of Dalit men in the workforce were still agricultural labourers (Table 1), working fewer hours for higher wages than in 1996.²¹ Many worked for part of the year outside the study villages, to supplement the work available within the villages. Work was less regular even so, and sometimes combined with construction when there was not enough work in agriculture. The proportion of men engaged in non-agricultural occupations had barely changed between 1996 and 2008/9.

A smaller proportion of Dalit women in the workforce were working as agricultural labourers. The male/female wage gap in agriculture had increased between 1996 and 2008/9. Eight percent of Dalit women in the workforce were now working in the knitwear sector. This was a recent departure in 2008/9. All of those involved were young unmarried women too.²² Whereas virtually all the Dalit women working outside agriculture were working in the knitwear sector in 2008/9, Dalit men were

²¹ Daily agricultural wages increased by roughly 20% in real terms between 1996 and 2008/9. The CPIAL is used as a deflator here. If one takes into account the fact that men were working mostly on contract in 2008/9, the increase in their wages is nearer 35%. The increase was much lower than the increase between 1981/2 and 1996 either way.

²² Unlike women living in Tiruppur town that feature in De Neve 2010.

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.

More women described themselves as 'housewives', 'staying at home', or 'not working' in 2008/9 than in 1996. Whereas in 1996 only 22% of Dalit women in the workforce had so described themselves, the proportion in 2008/9 was 35%.

Meanwhile, the proportion of non-Dalit women so describing themselves in 2008/9 had risen to 53%. These represent very significant increases in withdrawals from 'productive' work since 1996. The 'domestic work' on which they were now engaged full-time had become easier in some respects – water was more plentiful and nearer by, there were better PDS supplies, some people were cooking with LPG, and some were using mixi grinders to prepare food. Fertility rates had come down further too.²³ In other ways domestic work had become more demanding though, as standards continued to rise.

The age distributions of female occupations are shown in Table 2. It was difficult to get reliable data on ages so these should be treated as approximations only. The general patterns shown in the Table are revealing nevertheless and supported by more casual evidence too. The proportion of Dalit women not engaged in 'productive' occupations is relatively high in the 15<30 age group when many are getting married, pregnant and/or looking after young children. It falls in the 30<45 age group by which time children are going to school. It rises again in the 45<60 age group, and then peaks in the 60+ age group 60% of whom were not engaged in 'productive' occupations. Twenty six percent of the 60+ age group were still working as agricultural labourers though, many with few other means of support. The pattern is very different among non-Dalits. The proportion of non-Dalit women not doing any 'productive' work is relatively high in the 15<30 age group (though not as high as in the Dalit case as more non-Dalits in this age group were in College or school). It rises in the 30<45 age group which is when among Dalits it falls. It then stays at the same level in the 45<60 age group, and goes on to peak at 80% in the 60+ age group. Only 20% of non-Dalit women aged 60+ were engaged in 'productive' work, and all of this was within the household. All in all, considerably higher proportions of Dalit than non-Dalit women were engaged in 'productive' activities at all stages. The 'productive' work of Dalit women was generally more demanding than that of non-Dalit women too.

There was virtually no child labour in the study villages in 2008/9. Virtually all Dalit children aged 5 to 14 years were in school, the majority on track to complete secondary as well as primary. Dalit households were focusing on children in 2008, seeing children, and children's education as an investment in the future. Women's domestic work is key here – and took on more value here – supporting children's performance in school. The fact that many non-Dalit children were in private schools gave Dalits a stronger role in state schools, reducing the discrimination to which they were subjected there. Very few Dalits were in private schools. Untouchability was no longer explicitly practised in village schools in 2008/9. Its explicit practice had only been abolished relatively recently though.²⁴ There were still cases of discrimination in

²³ The majority of Dalits had 1-3 surviving children, with a mode of 2 in 2008/9.

²⁴ The Ambedkar People's Movement had achieved the abolition of separate seating, and separate drinking vessels in schools in the study villages, in 1998. Other forms of discrimination and untouchability were abolished more slowly though.

a High School in a neighbouring village which some Dalit children from the villages attended however.

There were several Dalits from the villages in higher education in 2008/9. There were none who had got anywhere near this in 1981/2, and only one or two in 1996. The post-SSLC qualifications on which Dalits had embarked or had completed in 2008/9 included Plus 2, Teacher training, a BA/BCom degree, and a law degree. There were more girls than boys among those in higher education in 2008/9 too. This raised real possibilities of upward mobility. 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. Experience in surrounding areas had given them reason to expect success here, unlike in other parts of India,²⁵ or even in Chennai now too.²⁶

There were more Dalit housing colonies in 2008/9 and still more were being planned. 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. There seemed to be an insatiable demand for house sites, confirming quite how crowded Dalit colonies had been earlier, and still were.

Revived village panchayats had been in place for some time by 2008/9, with their systems of reservations for Dalit women, Dalit men and non-Dalit women. They had been established shortly after the 1996 fieldwork, following elections in October 1996. They made a substantial difference to the position of Dalits, raising their visibility, enabling them to make themselves heard and to be treated with somewhat more respect. 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 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 was that Dalits were more confident in their dealings with outsiders, and somewhat more assertive in their dealings with non-Dalits in the villages too. It was the husbands of Dalit representatives who had 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 however. Hotels and tea-shops still practised the two-tumbler system,²⁷ and there were strict rules about where Dalits sat and moved in the hotels and tea-shops as well as in the farm compounds in which many Dalits worked.

²⁵ This was a real possibility in this context unlike in other contexts. See Jeffery et al. (2008) e.g.

²⁶ Kapadia, private communication.

²⁷ 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 there. 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.

Women's self help groups (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. A coir project introduced in the early 2000s was another initiative that was similar to the SHGs, but run by a different department, and also shortlived. It ran for a year or two and then closed down.

The coverage of the ICDS, maternity benefits and pensions had increased by 2008/9. The first health centre had been established in one of the study villages too. Having a health centre in the village was particularly valuable for Dalits who had difficulty accessing health facilities further away. The PDS had also 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 that both women and men needed to do.²⁸

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 accessible to Dalit women as this. People working on the scheme were entitled to 100 days of employment per household per year in theory, at a daily wage of Rs.80/- in 2008/9. (This was raised to Rs.100/- on 1 January 2010, and to Rs. 119/- in 2011.) The scheme 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. By February 2011, a number of households had already exhausted the 100 days to which they were entitled for the year.²⁹ The uptake was almost exclusively female. The wages were not high enough to attract men. The majority of people involved were Dalits too. NREGS work was regarded as less arduous than agricultural labour. The hours were similar – six hours of work with one hour off for lunch. There was competition within households for NREGS work, older women complaining that younger women within the household got precedence when the household looked as though it would come up against the 100 day limit for the year. The NREGS was having a significant impact on female agricultural wages. These had been raised in January 2010 to match the Rs.100/- being paid by the NREGS. It seemed likely that they would be raised again in 2011 when the next NREGS increase came through.³⁰ Women getting more work that was more appealing, and women getting better wages in agriculture, were both very significant benefits associated with the NREGS.

To summarise: The numbers of Dalit women 'staying at home', 'not working' and/or being 'housewives', both when they were going through pregnancy and childbirth,

²⁸ Male agricultural labourers discussing the number of days of paid work they did per week 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.

²⁹ As confirmed on a brief re-visit in February 2011.

³⁰ Evidence on the 2011 increase in wages in agriculture is not available. The 2011 increase in the NREGS wage came through after the field visit in February 2011.

and/or had young children, and when they were very old, had increased since 1996. Dalit women were benefiting from somewhat higher incomes, better living conditions, and fewer children too. It was a major achievement that child labour had virtually disappeared. The next generation of girls were getting a much better start than their mothers had had. Women were not yet getting significantly better employment opportunities though.

IV. Discussion

The main points that have been established so far are that:

1. Dalit women had decreased their participation in paid employment while at the same time benefiting from an improvement in the quality of paid employment in which they were still engaged.
2. Dalit women had not benefited nearly as much as men from the general improvement in employment opportunities though. There was more in all this for women as dependents of men who were earning more than before.
3. Dalit women's decreased participation in paid employment had been made possible by a substantial rise in earnings of men and an increase in state welfare interventions.
4. Dalit women had benefited from higher standards of living while decreasing their participation in paid employment.
5. Dalit women were more dependent on others in their households for income than before, which meant that the basis of their autonomy was less secure.
6. Children were being given higher priority in Dalit households and Dalit women benefited from this not least because it increased the valuation of their domestic work.
7. The possibilities of the current generation of Dalit women benefiting from improved employment opportunities themselves were limited, but the possibilities were increasing for the generation to come.

Dalit women were better off in material terms in 2008/9 than they had been in 1981/2. Their status within their households appeared to have improved too.

This calls into question the link between women's status within the household on the one hand, and women's participation in paid work on the other. It is not just a question of whether women do paid work outside the household or not. There are a number of other factors that also come into play.

First and foremost is the quality of paid work – its terms and conditions, and the employment relations involved. It was certainly a step forward in this case for Dalit women not to be doing so much work outside the household that was associated with drudgery and low pay. It was clear that their standards of living increased as they reduced their involvement in paid work outside the household too. There were many respects in which their status within the household had increased also. Their bargaining power within the household appeared to have increased as they were no longer so overworked and poorly paid – earning so little and working so hard for it did not appear to have given them much bargaining power before. They were still burdened by patriarchal relations within the household however, which meant that

they shouldered virtually all of the domestic work. This, together with norms about what it was appropriate for women to do, meant that they did not have access to many of the improved employment opportunities open to men. There had been a substantial increase for men, and very little increase for women, in the availability of work that was reasonably paid. The exception was young unmarried women who did not have domestic responsibilities who worked for a few years in the knitwear industry, but they were not well paid. The majority of Dalit women in paid employment were still agricultural labourers earning less than half of the wages of men. It was because Dalit women had such limited alternative opportunities that their agricultural wages remained so low.

The fact that women were able to reduce their participation in poor quality paid work outside the household was made possible by the increase in men's earnings, and the substantial proportions of their increased earnings that men contributed to the household budget.³¹ One of the things that was crucial here was that women had the option of moving in and out of paid work. They could take agricultural labour up again at any stage if men were not contributing enough. They used threats to go back to work on occasion as effective bargaining counters to put pressure on men. Men gained prestige from supporting their families, enabling their women to stay at home, and vice versa. Social pressures reinforced their playing of positive roles.

Had it not been for the fact that men had made substantial contributions in this context it would not have been possible for women to reduce their paid work nearly as much. The position of widows and deserted or separated wives brings this point home forcefully. They suffered acutely from the lack of male contributions to the household budget, and the fact that they had to rely on their own poorly paid employment instead.

State social policy also played an important role in enabling women to reduce their participation in poor quality paid work outside the household. State social policy limited increases in the cost of living and also provided some cushion against adversity in this case. Had this social policy not been in place women would not have been able to reduce their paid work nearly as much.

Relevant also here is the fact that the valuation of domestic work had undergone substantial changes over the period under consideration. One of the reasons for this was the changing position of children. In 1981/2 children were regarded as burdens, sent out to work as soon as they were old enough, going to school for limited periods if at all, and getting low priority within their households overall. By 2008/9, children were seen as investments in the future, investments that would bear fruit through education, and good quality care. Women's roles in caring for children, supporting children's performance in school, were highly valued in this respect.³² The valuation of domestic work had increased in other ways as standards of living had increased too. This had strengthened women's status within the household as their participation in paid work fell.

³¹ This did not mean that men contributed all of their earnings to the household budget or that women felt as able as men to spend household income on themselves. Cf. Kapadia 1995 on this, and Geetha 2007.

³² Rao 2011 notes this too.

While there had been real improvements in the lives of women in these Dalit communities, what still remained very unsatisfactory was the absence of better independent sources of income. One can point to the general improvement in material well-being, for Dalits as well as non-Dalits, women as well as men, and the fact that a lot of state welfare programmes had benefited women as much as men. What also needs to be stressed is that women were still paid so much less than men for agricultural labour, and that women had not had access to many of the other independent sources of income available to men. This point is particularly relevant in the context of the discourse of labour shortage in the area, the response to which had been to bring migrant labour from further and further away, and to raise the wages of men, rather than to develop work regimes that would allow for increased contributions from women.

Thus, while the position of women had improved in many respects as they withdrew from paid employment, it remained the case that women were reliant on the goodwill of men. One only had to look at cases in which men were not delivering to see how vulnerable this left them³³ in a population in which the majority were doing quite well.

³³ See Rao 2011 for examples that bring this out.

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Table 1:

col. %	All Males		All Females		Dalit Males		Dalit Females		Non-Dalit Males		Non-Dalit Females	
	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9	1996	2008/9
own agriculture	19	23	31	13	1	1			29	37	44	22
livestock keeping	3	2	4	4	2	1	2	3	3	2	5	4
agriclabourer	28	30	31	25	65	66	74	53	8	8	13	8
garments	9	21	1	7	4	16		8	12	24	1	6
powerloom	3	2	1	0	4	4	1	0	2	1		
other non-agric	31	17	7	5	18	7	2	1	37	23	9	8
all in non-domestic employment	92	94	73	54	94	95	78	65	91	94	71	47
domestic work only			26	46			22	35			29	53
unemployed	8	6			6	5			9	6		
all workers	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
LFPR	69.6	66.3	53.5	41	72.7	65.9	56.2	47.7	68.1	66.6	52.4	36.6
total no. in sample	591	541	573	487	200	212	185	196	391	329	388	291

Source: Village surveys, 1996, 2008/9.

Table 2a: All females 2008/9

row %	young	at school	domestic	knitwear	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	all	sample nos.*
0<5	100								100	22
5<15		97	1	1					100	66
15<30		26	35	15	21		1	1	100	117
30<45			30	5	37	4	20	5	100	128
45<60			38		21	8	21	11	100	71
60+			77		7	2	9	5	100	81
all	5	20	35	5	19	3	10	4	100	485

Table 2b: All Dalit females 2008/9

row %	young	at school	domestic	knitwear	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	all	sample nos.*
0<5	100								100	12
5<15		94	3	3					100	34
15<30		12	39	15	32			2	100	65
30<45			12	2	83	2			100	48
45<60			29		64	7			100	14
60+			64		27	9			100	22
all	6	21	26	6	39	2		1	100	195

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

row %	young	at school	domestic	knitwear	AL	livestock	agriculture	other	all	sample nos.*
0<5	100								100	10
5<15		100							100	32
15<30		44	31	15	8		2		100	52
30<45			40	6	9	5	33	8	100	80
45<60			40		11	9	26	14	100	57
60+			81				12	7	100	59
all	3	19	41	4	6	3	17	6	100	290

* excluding those with missing data here

Source: Village survey 2008/9.