
JOHN HARRISS, J JEYARANJAN, K NAGARAJ

The “Slater” villages of Tamil Nadu that were first surveyed by the University of Madras economist, Gilbert Slater, and his students in 1916, were resurveyed in the 1930s, 1960s and the 1980s. This paper reports and discusses a 2008 resurvey of Iruvelpattu, one of the five Slater villages in Tamil Nadu.

The 2008 study tells the story of persistence of landlord power, continuing dependence of a majority of households on agriculture in spite of the significant diversification of employment that has taken place, and an apparent stagnation in the agricultural economy after the relative success of the green revolution in the 1970s. It also brings out a tightening in the labour market and dalit political mobilisation as well as a shift in agricultural wage rates. However, the level of state intervention in the interests of social security through primary healthcare provision, schools in which teachers are actually present, and the maintenance of a universal public distribution system as well as the operation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, all distinguish Iruvelpattu generally from villages in other parts of the country.

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John Harriss (jharriss@sfu.ca) is with the School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Canada. J Jeyaranjan (idachennai@gmail.com) is with the Institute for Development Alternatives, Chennai. K Nagaraj (karkadanagaraj@gmail.com) is with the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai.

"Village studies", once an important mode of research, have largely been neglected in India in recent years – perhaps for good reason, having come to be conducted, often, very casually. More generally, research on agrarian change has languished latterly, alongside the neglect of the agricultural economy in public policy in the years of economic liberalisation. But there are signs now of some revival of research interest in rural economy and society, as well as of policy attention (notably with the introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), as seems wholly appropriate in the context of a country in which it is still the case that a substantial majority of the people live and work in the countryside. This paper is a contribution to this renewed interest, based on a village study, which we believe continues to represent a potentially valuable way of approaching the study of rural social and economic change. In this case our study has an unusual historical depth because we have taken up for research one of the “Slater villages” of Tamil Nadu.

Gilbert Slater was appointed in 1915 to head a new department of economics in the University of Madras. He believed that, for his students, both the understanding “the causes and remedies of Indian poverty” were essential, and that they stood to learn a great deal about it from studies of village economies. As a way to achieving his objective he set them about studying their native villages, which were spread across the Madras Presidency – five of them lying in what is now the state of Tamil Nadu – and he published their studies in his book Some South Indian Villages in 1918. Resurveys were then completed in all the villages in 1936-37 under the direction of P J Thomas and K C Ramakrishnan, also from the department of economics in the University of Madras (1940), and the comparison of the Slater and the Thomas and Ramakrishnan studies has been drawn upon by the leading historians of the Madras Presidency in the 1920s and 1930s, Christopher Baker (1975) and K A Manikumar (2003) as a means of assessing trends of change in the rural economy. Some of the Slater villages, as we may now describe them, were studied in 1961 by the Oxford economist Margaret Haswell (1967), and some by the Agro-Economic Research Centre of the University of Madras at about the same time. Later, the five Tamil villages in the Slater set were studied by S Guhan and colleagues associated with the Madras Institute of Development Studies early in the 1980s. Guhan himself, together with the anthropologist Joan Mencher, and with the assistance of three young research assistants, pioneered the 1980s studies in much the way that Slater himself had done more than 60 years earlier, with work in the
village of Iruvelpattu, in the former South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. He and Mencher published their study of “Iruvelpattu Revisited” in the Economic & Political Weekly in 1983. Together the Slater village studies constitute what is probably a unique set of village surveys, without comparators anywhere else in India, and – for all their limitations – they provide a valuable means for studying rural economic and social change in Tamil Nadu over the last century.

We have taken up fresh studies of the Slater villages, now almost 30 years on from the time of Guhan’s studies and almost a century from that of the first round. Our initial study has also been one of Iruvelpattu.¹ Here we focus upon what have seemed to us to be the most significant findings from comparison of the successive studies of the village, which concern trends in the control over land and labour, and caste politics, through the 20th century. We tell a story of the continuity of landlord power, even if it has been chipped away through the century, and of the continuing dependence of a majority of households on agriculture in spite of the significant diversification of employment that has taken place, and of apparent stagnation in the agricultural economy after the relative success of the green revolution in the 1970s. And while it is too much to speak of a “social revolution” as having taken place, we do record some empowerment of dalits. Some tightening in the labour market and dalit political mobilisation has brought about a historic shift in agricultural wage rates.

1 Introduction: The Village and Its Setting

Iruvelpattu is now in Villupuram district and lies 12 km south of the district headquarters along the Grand Southern Trunk Road, a little to the south of the South Pennar river, and besides its tributary, the river Malattar. The spatial context of the village – the fact that it straddles a major road and is close to a significant town that is itself well-connected with centres of economic growth in northern Tamil Nadu – is significant, making for both “push” and “pull” factors on the village population. It is also in the broad region of the Tamil country described by historians as the “plains”. Historically this was a region outside the “valleys” – the centre of high Tamil culture of the major river valleys – and was forest for long and exploited more for grazing than for agriculture. Baker argues that, “The mobilisation of the plains was achieved partly by the immigration and settlement of Telugu warrior chiefs and clans …” (Baker 1984: 40). Much of the agricultural settlement of the area of Villupuram was led, in this way, by Telugu-speaking warriors in the Vijayanagara era, amongst them, Reddiars like those who have historically been dominant in Iruvelpattu, and who were the hereditary (in practice, if not in principle) village headmen (or “munsifs”). E V Sundaram Reddi, Slater’s student, who assisted in the first study in 1916, came from the family described subsequently by Haswell as that of the “plutocrat” of the village, and by Guhan and Mencher as that of the “Big Landlord” or “m”. They concluded their study in 1981 by summarising the ways in which the landlord exerted control over the village and they said, “developments ten to twenty years from now vis-à-vis will be interesting to watch”. As we shall explain, one of the more striking findings of this re-study of the village is that the landlord has continued to dominate the village, even if his power is less extensive than it was. Continuity amidst change indeed.

Slater’s account of Iruvelpattu emphasises one feature of the village in particular:

Even in this small, almost self-contained, Dravidian community we find two civilisations, both apparently of vast antiquity, existing side-by-side, and though each for innumerable generations has acted and reacted upon the other, they still remain distinct. On the west side of the high road is the caste village, open, exposed to the sun. One house in it [it is still there, the house of the m] is imposing, with two stories, a flat roof, a covered approach, ornamental iron gates and pillars adorned with paintings. The two parallel streets, running east and west and connected at the west end by a cross street, are maintained in a fit condition for cart traffic [today they are paved and motorable]. The houses, some built of brick, some of earth, some tiled, some thatched, have the little pial, or verandah, facing the street, with niches in the walls for lights to burn at nightfall [this description holds quite well to the present, though the dates upon them show that there was a good deal of construction of more modern terraced houses in the 1960s and 1970s] … To the east of the high road is the pariah village, with its own architecture and its own temples. It has no streets, only paths worn smooth by the pressure of bare feet [still partially true]. It lies altogether in the shade, in a grove of palms mixed with trees of various kinds [today there is a large coconut grove that belongs to the m]. Houses are made of a framework of sticks, the roofs thatched with palm leaves, and the walls also woven, as it were, of leaves and twigs. These dwellings are dark inside, but with sufficient openings to keep well ventilated. The floor is bare earth. There is little privacy here… (1918: 11).

Iruvelpattu, like most villages in the Tamil country, includes a caste settlement (the uur), occupied now very largely by Vanniyaars with the few remaining Reddiar families – and a separate cheti, or “colony”, occupied by dalits – here Paraiyars. The colony is on the eastern side of the main road, which today – given the heavy traffic along it – constitutes a more significant barrier between the “two civilisations” (of “caste Hindus” and of dalits) of which Slater spoke, than it would have done in 1916. The dalit settlement now has many more houses built of brick or concrete, but there are still some that are recognisable from Slater’s description. A paved road now runs through it, electric street lights placed alongside it, but there still are streets that are only paths beaten by the traffic of human feet. It remains true that “there is little privacy here”.

Beyond emphasising the distinction between “pariahs” and “caste Hindus”, Slater did not describe the caste composition of Iruvelpattu, but in 1937, A K Veeraraghavan, who undertook the study of the village for Thomas and Ramakrishnan, reported its caste composition in detail. It is clear that though Iruvelpattu has for long been a village occupied principally by people from the two major labouring caste communities of northern Tamil Nadu, the Vanniyaars and the Paraiyars, under Reddiar dominance, the population was more diverse in terms of caste in the past (Table 2, p 49). In 1916, Slater could claim that “To a great extent the village is self-supporting”, because of its reliance on local materials for building and for implements, the proximity of a weaving village, and the presence in the village community of all the principal specialists from artisan and service castes to supply the goods and services commonly required. As it has ceased to be substantially “self-supporting”, however, some members of the specialist caste communities have moved away (or in the case of the carpenters and blacksmiths, though they still reside in the village, they are no longer “village artisans” but are engaged in other
of its population, and there seems only to have been one decade, that of the 1970s, when there was some inward migration.

The net addition to the village population over the entire half-century from 1901 to 1951 was a meagre 110, reflecting the impact of the Influenza epidemic of 1917-18, and also migration, such as that to plantations in Sri Lanka to which Slater referred. That there was somewhat more growth of the population after independence, probably reflects a decline in the death rate as public health conditions improved, but a comparison of the annual growth rate of population both the communities have seen net outmigration. But a closer look at Tables 2 and 3 reveals that there are distinct periods when people from the two communities either migrated out of the village or migrated into it. The period up to around 1981 may have seen an immigration of caste Hindus whilst dalits moved out. Guhan and Mencher found evidence from interviews that a number of dalit families had moved out for work on coffee plantations in Chikmagalur in Karnataka, while young men were going out for work as coolies in Chennai or in Bangalore. “On the other hand”, they said, “there was little evidence of any migration from the caste village”, and they concluded that “the middle castes [meaning, essentially, the Vanniyars] have constituted a non-migrant and growing element”, probably linked with the relative success of the agricultural economy in the 1970s. The period after 1981 has seen the reversal of these trends, with the dalit population of the village having grown, while the dalits constituted a non-migrant and growing element. In this case, probably linked with the relative success of the agricultural economy in the 1970s. The period after 1981 has seen the reversal of these trends, with the dalit population of the village having grown, while the dalits have continued to trickle away, except in the decade of the 1970s – when it is possible that the success of the green revolution increased opportunities and employment in the village itself (as Guhan and Mencher thought was the case). The fact that sex ratios in the village are generally very low, even when there has been constant outmigration (usually associated with higher sex ratios since such migration is generally sex selective in that males migrate on a larger scale in search of work), perhaps, means that familial migration from the village has played a very important role here.

While in overall terms, the village has seen steady net outmigration, the picture is more complex if we consider different social groups:

If we look at the two major caste groups, dalits and caste Hindus, it appears that for the period 1937-2008 as a whole there has been net outmigration from both populations: the annual compound growth rate of population for dalits for this period as a whole is 0.72% and it is even lower at 0.62% for the caste Hindus. Since these rates are likely to be lower than the natural rate of growth of population both the communities have seen net outmigration.

In Tables 2 and 3, we present data on the caste composition of the village and the growth of population. In Table 2, we present data on the caste composition of the village and the growth of population. In Table 3, we present data on the caste composition of the village and the growth of population.

Table 1: Population of Iruvelpattu (1901-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population of Iruvelpattu</th>
<th>Annual Compound Growth Rate of Total Population</th>
<th>Annual Natural Rate of Growth of Population in Rural Tamil Nadu</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>535 506 1,041</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>946 1043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>583 567 1,150</td>
<td>1.00 0.72 0.83</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>973 1044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>530 523 1,053</td>
<td>-0.88 0.25 0.34</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>987 1033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>524 503 1,027</td>
<td>-0.25 0.56 0.82</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>960 1034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>564 546 1,100</td>
<td>1.15 0.81 1.13</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>968 108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>588 563 1,151</td>
<td>0.57 0.85 1.25</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>957 1014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>667 583 1,250</td>
<td>0.83 0.81 1.13</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>874 1003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>704 580 1,284</td>
<td>0.27 1.53 2.03</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>824 990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>805 739 1,544</td>
<td>1.23 1.63 1.59</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>918 987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>861 817 1,678</td>
<td>1.26 1.44 1.39</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>949 981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>894 888 1,782</td>
<td>0.60 -0.52 1.11</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>993 992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>895 894 1,789</td>
<td>0.06 NA 0.91</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>999 NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Caste Composition of Iruvelpattu (1937-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population (Total)</th>
<th>Annual Compound Growth Rate of Population</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>418 692 1,110</td>
<td>0.60 0.44 0.50</td>
<td>1,114 749 874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>482 768 1,250</td>
<td>-0.60 1.00 0.50</td>
<td>1,030 913 949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>410 874 1,284</td>
<td>1.13 0.20 1.11</td>
<td>967 898 918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>470 1,074 1,544</td>
<td>-0.60 0.50 0.84</td>
<td>1,030 913 949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>538 1,140 1,678</td>
<td>0.60 0.40 0.84</td>
<td>1,030 913 949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>669 1,113 1,782</td>
<td>-0.40 0.60 0.80</td>
<td>1,030 913 949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>697 1,092 1,789</td>
<td>-0.27 0.60 0.80</td>
<td>1,030 913 949</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Trends in Caste Hindu and Dalit Population in Iruvelpattu (1937-2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population of Iruvelpattu</th>
<th>Annual Compound Growth Rate of Population</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>2001</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from Census of India for respective years, for 1937 from Veeraraghavan in Thomas and Ramakrishnan (1940); for 2008 survey data.
the caste Hindu population has declined. The Vanniyars, with numbers of houses that are shut up, and others that have fallen into ruin, provide visual evidence of this. Agricultural work in Iruvelpattu, and labouring occupations generally, have become more distinctly the sphere of the dalits.

Amongst caste Hindus there has been, especially, a sharp decline in population belonging to castes other than Vanniyars. This is true of Reddiars, the socially and economically dominant group in the village, whose number declined from 57 in 1937 to 46 in 1981, and to a mere 18 by 2008; and of artisanal and service castes like the Vannan (from 15 in 1937 to two in 2008); barber (seven to nil); and Achari (19 to 15). The village today has essentially become a two-caste village with caste Hindus numerically predominant (their 1,003 members accounting for 56% of the population) and dalits, the other numerically significant community (with 697 members accounting for nearly 39% of the population). The rest, who accounted for 16.2% of the population in 1937, account for just about 5% of the population today. The relative increase in the numbers of the dalits may be a factor contributing to their assertion in the village in recent times.

1.2 Education
An important trend of the recent past has been the distinct improvement in literacy, especially amongst dalits. There was already a village school with three teachers, in 1916 and “67 boys and seven girls on the rolls”). The numbers both of teachers and of pupils had actually declined by 1937, and it was reported then that parents of boys from the cheri were afraid for them to send to the village school and that though they wished for a school of their own, they were too afraid to ask for it. By 1981, however, it appeared that the main constraint on the dalit children going to school was their parents’ fears for their safety in crossing the busy main road – and it was not until 2003 that a panchayat union school was finally opened in the cheri. The total number of pupils in the village school are now rather low, partly because of the opening of the new school, but also because so many parents choose to send their children out to private convent schools to which they travel in school vans.

The overall literacy rate in the village was calculated by Guhan and Mencher in 1981 to have been only 32.5%, lower than in the district, and very much lower than in the state as a whole; and at that time the literacy rate amongst dalit women was only 6.7% and amongst men 13.7%. Guhan and Mencher observed that “The disparity between the caste Hindus and the Harijans [dalits], and the still abysmally low level of schooling in the case of the Harijan women are striking”. The data for 2008 (Table 4) show that great strides have been made in levels of literacy (as given by the proportion of those over the age of seven, who have received some schooling), and that gaps both between men and women, and between dalits and others are nothing like as great as they were. The improvement in the literacy of dalit women from 6.7% to 54.6% is considerable. We observed the pride of dalit women, especially in their girl children’s school uniforms and their school books. This, according to some women with whom we spoke, was a big change of the last 25 years. Yet even now, in spite of the progress, one-third of the village population remains illiterate; among the dalits the proportion is 40%.

Of those in Iruvelpattu with some schooling, however, in 1981 similar proportions (about 35%) had gone beyond primary schooling amongst both caste Hindus and dalits, but at that time very few of the dalits advanced beyond middle school. In this respect, times have definitely changed, as Table 5 shows, comparing the position in 2008 with 1981. There is now very little difference amongst those who complete some schooling, between caste Hindus and dalits.

Whereas, there was still in 1981 a significant gap between caste Hindus and dalits, after the primary level, it had virtually disappeared by 2008, and while Guhan and Mencher found no graduates in the colony, in 2008 there were 23 with tertiary qualifications, one of them a PhD, seven of them women. This is a big and important change that has taken place over the last quarter century, though clearly inequalities do remain between dalits and others in the sphere of education.

1.3 Village Habitat and Public Services
It is still possible in Iruvelpattu today to recognise Slater’s descriptions from 1916 of the built environment. It remains the case that more than two-thirds of village houses are thatched, and three-quarters of the houses in the dalit colony. Living space remains severely constricted. The major problem that Guhan and Mencher discussed in their study was that of the insecurity of tenure for dalits. Then there were just nine houses on naathan poromboke (the formal house site area) and 40 each on land

Table 4: Percentage of the Population Who Have Received Some Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Group</th>
<th>Percentage of the Population Who Have Some Schooling</th>
<th>Index for Females with Males = 100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male 2008 Female 2008 All 2008</td>
<td>Male 2008 Female 2008 All 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste Hindu</td>
<td>54.7 83.8 26.7 60.4 42.1 72.3 49 72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalits</td>
<td>13.7 66.7 6.7 54.6 10.2 60.6 49 82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>43.3 77.3 20.2 58.1 32.5 67.7 47 75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index for dalits with caste Hindus = 100

25 80 25 90 24 84 – –


Table 5: Levels of Education Achieved (1981 and 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Distribution of Those Who Received Some Schooling by Level of Education Achieved (%)</th>
<th>Index for 2008</th>
<th>Index for Dalits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See Table 4.
Not long before the 1981 study, B. had opposed moves by government to grant house sites to dalits, and he had even succeeded in persuading some of the dalits to sign a petition to the effect that they were not in need of house sites! This situation has changed since 1981, as a result of the dalit political mobilisation that we analyse below, that was eventually successful in securing house site pattas for the dalit households in 1996. Security of tenure of their house sites is an extremely important advance for them.

There have been improvements for dalits, too, in regard both to drinking water supply and electricity. Historically, people in the village depended for drinking water, especially on spring channels from the Malattar river, and there was one drinking water well in the cheri. By 1981, however, the caste village was being supplied with piped water from an overhead tank – while there was still only one well in the cheri, and that was dry for six months in the year of the study. In these circumstances the dalits had to bring water from irrigation wells, travelling up to 2 km for this, and making as many as five trips in a day. Another important change over the last 25 years for the dalits of Irupavelpattu, therefore, has been a provision of a piped water supply for them too, from two overhead tanks – again, as a result of their political mobilisation.

By 1981, the village had electricity (rural Tamil Nadu had by this time for long been the best electrified in the country), and about a quarter of the houses had connections (in 2008 only eight did not have connection). The cheri, meanwhile, lacked individual house connections and had only three street lights. In this respect, too, therefore, the cheri was much less well-provided than the caste village. But here, as well, there has been positive change since 1981 and all but two of the dalit houses had individual connections by 2008, and the numbers of street lights had been increased. The numbers of TV sets in the village (139 amongst the dalits, and 238 amongst the upper caste Hindus) show that virtually every house has electricity.

One area, however, in which there has been very little change at all is that of sanitation. Slater noted that “the most fitting and seemly solution of one sanitary question is to use the river bed as a latrine” and described this as “an article of faith firmly held in the village”. Guhan and Mencher commented dryly that, “this seems to have held good in the last several decades” – for only B. had a private latrine in his house in 1981. By 2008, the situation had improved just a little and there were 19 private latrines amongst the caste Hindus (in 8% of the houses), though still only one amongst the dalits. It is a puzzle as to why the state of Tamil Nadu, arguably the most progressive in the whole of India, should have remained generally so backward in this regard.

In spite of the continuing lack of progress with regard to sanitation, there clearly have been improvements in the village infrastructure and public services in the 20th century, and especially, over the last quarter century – and these improvements have spread, with an appreciable lag, to the dalits. In Slater’s time, the village had a post office and a board school (a school run by the district board). By 1981, these institutions of the state had been supplemented by the government primary health centre (started in 1969, thanks partly to the initiative of B., during the time in which he served as the local member of legislative assembly (MLA), by a veterinary sub-centre (also due to B.’s initiative), and by the establishment of a fair price shop. By that time, too, the chief minister’s Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme for school-going children had been started (under the government of M G Ramanachandran, whose pet project it was). By 2008, there had also been established the new higher elementary school in the colony, there were balwadis in both village and colony and an Integrated Child Development Services (icdss) centre. Most significantly, with regard to the presence of the state, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (nrega), legislated for by central government in 2006, was initiated in Irupavelpattu, while our research was in progress, in July 2008.

1.4 Village Economy: Landholding and Other Assets

There has historically been a high level of concentration of land-ownership in Irupavelpattu, and given that the landowner described as B. by Guhan and Mencher is still there, nearly 30 years later, it seems appropriate to start with him – the grandson and heir to the landlord whom Slater met in 1916. According to Slater’s estimates, the family at that time owned about 400 acres in Irupavelpattu, about two-thirds of all the village lands, and another 200 acres in adjoining villages. The landlord cultivated

Table 6: Distribution of Landholdings in Irupavelpattu (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Land Owned (Acres)</th>
<th>Caste Hindus</th>
<th>Dalits</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Index of Access to Landownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.01-0.99</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00-1.99</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00-3.99</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.00-6.99</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.00-9.99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>452.81</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey data.

some 200 acres himself and leased the remainder of the land out. At the time, Slater reckoned, the average holding of all the others in the village was no more than four acres.

Margaret Haswell got back on to the trail of B. (her “village plutocrat”) in 1961, showing that he was successfully evading land reform legislation through benami transactions, and even still managing to acquire land through purchase from indebted smaller ryots. He still operated half the holding himself, and leased out the remainder. Guhan and Mencher deduce from Haswell’s account that B. then had a holding in Irupavelpattu of 307.5 standard acres, and they thought it possible that there had been some reduction of it by 1981. Though land reform legislation (now with a reduced ceiling) had been successfully evaded by B.,
it did appear that the ceiling legislation had discouraged him from acquiring further land, opening up opportunities for one or two of the Vanniyars to acquire larger holdings. Still, B.L.’s holding remained largely intact in 1981, accounting for more than a third of all the village lands, while the dalits owned less than 18 acres between them (less than 3% of the total), divided between 40 holdings, with the largest of them of less than two acres.

The distribution of landholdings in the village in 2008 is shown in Table 6 (p 51). While it was certain that the Reddiar landlord, B.L., still held a large holding, and he himself spoke of having 150 acres in the village, there was also no doubt that he had divested himself of land. But it is still the case that there is a sharp polarisation between his very large holding on the one hand, which still accounts for almost one-third of all the land owned by people of Iruvelpattu, and the very large numbers of small and marginal landholdings on the other. The seven holdings of 10 acres, and more in extent, including B.L.’s, account for about 43% of the total area owned. On the other hand there are 186 holdings of less than 4 acres in extent (what Slater thought was the average size of holding in 1916), accounting for 41.8% of the total area (comparable with Guhan and Mencher’s findings from patta statistics in 1981), and there are just 22, apart from B.L.’s, that are larger than this, accounting for 28.5% of the area. The numbers of those who might be described as having “substantial family farms”, or as those potentially of “rich peasants”, are small, and small and marginal holdings persist, now in the context of part-time farming in households in which – as we explain below – some members carry on other occupations. There is now very little tenancy of agricultural land at all, and the number of landless households has apparently doubled since 1981 (Guhan and Mencher say there were 95 such households in 1981 – 50 of them dalit – and there are 197 now) – which might be taken as striking evidence of “proletarianisation” (in 2008, 49% of households owned no land compared with 29% reported in 1981). Though the dalits still have a higher incidence of landlessness than the others in the village, they do make up a somewhat smaller share of all the landless than they did in 1981. Many more of them, clearly, own some land than was the case earlier (72 households as opposed to 40, owning about 58 acres, instead of 18) but the majority (41) are holdings of less than one acre. Just one man owns as much as five acres.

Apart from land, historically the most important assets in a village like Iruvelpattu, were cattle. A major change, therefore, between 1981 and 2008 has been the general replacement of draught cattle, first by tractors, and more recently, by power tillers, together with the introduction of combined harvesters. By 2008, amongst the people of Iruvelpattu 13 owned tractors (including one dalit), 11 owned power tillers (also including one dalit), and there were four combined harvesters (all owned by people in the caste village, one of them by B.L.), while the numbers of draught cattle are now down to just four or five teams. Electric pumps were introduced for irrigation, replacing the traditional water-lifting devices, following the arrival of electricity in 1958. By 2008, given the general fall in the water table from 40 feet to 100 feet, groundwater irrigation was by means of submersible pumps operating in borewells, and there were 68 of them in all (14 of them owned still by B.L.). The ownership of agricultural assets as well as land, therefore, remains concentrated.

1.5 Village Economy: Agriculture
There has been very little change either in the pattern of land use in Iruvelpattu over the century, or in the cropping pattern. Paddy has always occupied more than three-quarters of the gross cropped area (GCA), but the extent of double-cropping and even of triple-cropping has increased as a result of the developments of groundwater irrigation. By 1981, the higher-yielding green revolution varieties had been widely adopted. The same varieties (notably “Ponni” and “TKM9”) are still cultivated, which suggests that the wave of innovation of paddy varieties of the 1970s and 1980s in Tamil Nadu has passed. Reported yields, too, show little if any increase over 1981.

Cultivation of groundnuts and the various millets has very largely disappeared from the village, while irrigation development has brought some expansion of sugar cane cultivation. In 1981, it was reported that B.L. had 40 acres under sugar cane, but he has now given it up, because of “labour problems” in the village and delays at the sugar mill, both in the processing of cane and with payments. It seemed likely, however, that the principal reason for his shift over to the casuarina, the quick-growing tree used for firewood, was his increasing difficulty in securing adequate labour. He already had some land under casuarina in 1981, but the acreage has certainly been extended since then – when the cultivation of crops such as sugar cane and casuarinas provided one way for B.L. to evade land reform legislation. Casuarina, once planted, requires much less attention than other crops, and in 2008, B.L. accounted for about 75 of the 85 acres in the village under this tree crop.

Production Organisation: The big change that has come about in the agricultural system of Iruvelpattu and the surrounding area over the last quarter century has been its extensive mechanisation. There were tractors by 1981, and around that time, or a little later, mechanical threshing was introduced. But ploughing was done, as it always had been, by bullock or buffalo teams, commonly still drawing an old “country” plough; and harvesting and most threshing was still done manually. By 2008, however, it was said by the Reddiars in the village that “in a couple of years’ time they [referring to dalit labour] won’t know the sickle”, because of the taking over of harvesting and threshing by combined harvesters. Ploughing, too, as we mentioned, is now done almost entirely by tractors and increasingly by power tillers which are more handy in small fields, and in the normal course of events, the few remaining bullock teams in the village appear on the scene only at the stage of levelling the ploughed fields to get them ready for planting. The old bullock carts, used for generations as the principal means of transport of goods in the Tamil countryside, have mostly gone, too. Some have been adapted with wheels with rubber tyres, but most have been replaced by carts of a different construction – so that village carpenters and blacksmiths no longer have the roles that they once had – and much carriage of goods has been taken over by tractor-trailers.
Irrigation Organisation: Slater explained in 1916 that spring channels from the Malattar river provided water for domestic purposes and for irrigation, but he noted that the channels had to be dug out every year, and that this work was done through “the cooperative labour of the villagers”. This is what was known as kudimaramut, and this term was used by Veeraraghavan in his study in 1937. The system evidently still operated at that time, moral pressure being enough, so it was said, to persuade the villagers to carry out the work. It was still operating in 1961, but by 1981, however, had broken down. The spring channel was silted up by then, and though the village records described 185 acres as being irrigated from it, no irrigation was actually taking place. Desilting had been done at some point in the fairly recent past, but using hired labour.

Besides water from the Malattar the village in 1916 had a tank – as it still has – fed by a channel (the “Reddi channel”) said to be 15 miles long, from the river Pennar, and supplied also by surface drainage from the lands it passed through. But at that time it was blocked at the source through not having been maintained, and Slater reported (somewhat tongue-in-cheek, perhaps) that the repair of the channel was considered locally to be “a desirable improvement”. By 1937, as far as we can judge from Veeraraghavan’s account, the channel was open again and capable of re-charging the tank so as to make water available from it for seven months. It may still have been open in 1981, but it was not by 2008, though the public works department was said now to be responsible for it, and in the later part of 2008 work began on clearing it under NREGA. Previously, according to Reddiar informants, the clearing of the channel was organised by bl. Even now, however, in normal years the tank, though its supply of water is from run-off and surplus water from the upper village of Thenmangalam, supplies sufficient water for the samba season. The two sluices which were still being opened in 1981, and still were reportedly in 2008, by kambakaran (literally, “holder of the stick”). These traditional village officials are drawn from year to year, in rotation, from each of the four principal lineages amongst the dalits of Irupelttu. They were paid between them, according to report in 2008, by individual cultivators, though not at a set rate.

1.6 Occupations, Employment and Migration

The earlier studies of Irupelttu provide little information on employment outside agriculture, referring only to traditional village specialists without offering any numbers. There were carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, goldsmiths and oil pressers present in the village in 1916 and 1937, as well as washermen, at least one barber, temple priests, and perhaps one or more schoolteachers. By 1981 the goldsmiths, oil pressers and barbers had gone, and the number of the artisans was declining. This is a process that has continued. The fact that the authors of the first two studies mention no other non-agricultural occupations is probably significant, and one of the most striking changes to have taken place in the village over the last half-century, but especially over the last 20 years or so, has of course, been the considerable diversification of occupations. Guhan and Mencher found that 78 (24%) of the 323 households in Irupelttu in 1981 could be described as “non-agricultural”. By 2008, this number had doubled and those households depending primarily on non-agricultural occupations had come to make up, we estimate, more than 40% of all village households (Table 7), while the numbers both of cultivator and of agricultural labour households had declined. The number of agricultural labourers in Irupelttu now ~ 229 – are only a few more than the 210 reported by Veeraraghavan in 1937, though the population of the village has increased by about 60% over this time. In 2008, though cultivation still remained the most important single activity of Irupelttu, and employed two-thirds of the village labour force, it was no longer so essentially an “agricultural village”.

In 1981, while 85% of caste Hindu families were either cultivating households or dependent on non-agricultural occupations, amongst dalits 8% were dependent upon agricultural labour. It is still the case that more than 80% of cultivator households are caste Hindu, and that nearly 70% of all agricultural labour households are dalit. But a notable change since 1981 is the reduced dependence of the dalits on agricultural wage work. Now “only” 50% of their households are so dependent. There were only 10 dalit households amongst the 78 non-agricultural households of 1981 (13% of the total), and they are described as having been in “the poorer occupations, such as duck keepers, washermen and toddy tappers”. Now the dalit households account for about a third (31%) of all the households engaged in non-agricultural occupations. There are still toddy-tappers amongst them, but they also include drivers and others in “technical” occupations, and a small number of professionals and salaried people.

Slater’s view in 1916 was that emigration, then to plantations in Ceylon, seemed to be the principal means whereby it was possible for the people of Irupelttu to relieve their “population problem”; and in 1937 Veeraraghavan noted that though “for the last 20 years none has left the village as coolie for overseas plantations”, there was seasonal migration. He mentioned 20-30 families, from both cheri and village, as going out for work seasonally, some as far as Salem (130 km away), picking groundnuts, and reported that a few of Vanniyars were going out for work in Chennai.
In 1981, as we noted, evidence was found of emigration from the village by dalits, especially in the 1960s, but it was said that “there was little evidence of any recent migration from the caste village”, and only passing references are made to circular, seasonal migration. In these respects things have definitely changed.

By 2008, when we consider evidence on migration from the village (Tables 8 and 9), it is clear that Vanniyars and other caste Hindus have been moving out of agricultural occupations and some of them out of the village altogether, and that while the dalits too are involved in these shifts, the numbers of them moving into other activities and out of the village are fewer. Both larger numbers of people from Iruvelpattu who are working outside than we have been able to trace through our census and household listing.

Labour Shortage? These accounts of substantial migration, both permanent and temporary (“circular migration”), from Iruvelpattu lend credence to the complaints of the remaining Reddiar landlords about the extent of the “labour shortage” in agriculture in the village. It is “not a joke”, said BL, in English, while, another of the Reddiars said that “With the labour problems they are unable to live honourably”, in explanation of the agricultural work and the village community are becoming more significantly “dalit” than was the case before. These findings would no doubt be reinforced if we were able to determine the numbers of households from the different caste communities that have left the village altogether since 1981.

Not only have Vanniyars moved away in greater numbers but they – and people from other caste Hindu families – have moved, especially into non-agricultural, non-labouring employment. The dalits, however, are more commonly employed in labouring occupations, particularly in Chennai (as construction coolies on a temporary basis) and Bangalore, though there are a few in professional positions. In general, the dalits of Iruvelpattu work outside the village in large numbers, in activities such as sugar cane cutting, as well as in construction work and brickfields (though there were also four brick kilns in the village itself in 2007-08). There are reports about “five or six sugar cane cutting teams each with about 20 members”, or as many as “two hundred people” according to another account, from the dalit colony, who travel with about 20 members”, or as many as “two hundred people” according to another account, from the dalit colony, who travel widely, south to Thanjavur, and north into Andhra. They are outside for long periods but come back to the village for festivals, and it seems possible that our census of the village missed some of these people. The numbers involved in some of the reports we heard seem exaggerated, but it does appear likely that there are
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Table 8: Extent of Outmigration from Iruvelpattu (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Permanent Employment Related Migration</th>
<th>Temporary Employment Related Migration</th>
<th>All Migration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No of Households</td>
<td>No of Migrants</td>
<td>(1) As a Per Cent of Total Households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanniyar</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalits (Paraiyar)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Caste Hindus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey data.

1.7 Wages, Conditions of Employment and Levels of Living

Gilbert Slater was much exercised by the conditions of the labourers of Iruvelpattu as he observed them in 1916. He described the conditions of employment of padialis – labourers attached to a particular landowner/cultivator by long-term

Table 9: Distribution of Outmigrants by Nature of Employment and Place of Migration in Iruvelpattu (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Type of Outmigrants</th>
<th>No of Migrants</th>
<th>Distribution of Migrants by Employment</th>
<th>Place of Migration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanniyars</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Agric Lab</td>
<td>Chennai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Coolie</td>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cumin</td>
<td>Outside TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brick Making</td>
<td>Overseas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6 (24.0)</td>
<td>16 (64.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>15 (60.0)</td>
<td>3 (12.0)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (16.0)</td>
<td>4 (8.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>9 (14.8)</td>
<td>16 (49.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20 (32.8)</td>
<td>20 (32.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9 (14.8)</td>
<td>7 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23 (37.7)</td>
<td>4 (6.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalits</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Nil (0.0)</td>
<td>8 (40.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (50.0)</td>
<td>5 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4 (26.7)</td>
<td>7 (46.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nil (0.0)</td>
<td>7 (46.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15 (76.9)</td>
<td>2 (13.3)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>10 (50.0)</td>
<td>5 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4 (11.4)</td>
<td>15 (42.9)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (28.6)</td>
<td>9 (25.7)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (28.6)</td>
<td>25 (70.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Caste Hindus</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Nil (0.0)</td>
<td>12 (85.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (28.6)</td>
<td>11 (78.6)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nil (0.0)</td>
<td>7 (50.0)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (71.4)</td>
<td>5 (33.3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4 (3.6)</td>
<td>110 (100.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23 (20.9)</td>
<td>42 (38.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30 (27.3)</td>
<td>51 (46.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11 (10.0)</td>
<td>43 (39.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey data.
debt bondage – of whom BL’s grandfather alone employed around 40:

A “padial” is a sort of serf, who has fallen into hereditary dependence on a landowner by debt .... Quite recently a lad of 18 borrowed Rs 25 in cash and grain to celebrate his wedding with due festivity and became a padial. Such a loan never is repaid, but descends from one generation to another; and the padials themselves are transferred with the creditor’s lend when he sells it or dies.

According to Slater’s calculations such labourers were paid the equivalent of about a pound and a half of raw rice each day (around three-quarters of 1 kg), and their working days lasted usually for at least 12 hours. He was appalled by their conditions of work, and found that the padials of Iruvelpattu probably received rather less than “the gaol (jail) allowance for a man doing hard labour”. But he also thought that the efficiency and productivity of labour were low, and one of his principal conclusions was that “the Indian worker earns very low wages, has a very low standard of expenditure, and attains a very low level of efficiency, and these three characteristics of Indian life are so interconnected that it is impossible to say which is cause rather than effect”. Though he did not say so, he described the idea of a “poverty trap”.

In 1937, Veeraraghavan described daily-paid wage labour as well, but emphasised that “A semi-servile system of labour survives in the padiyal” and provided a comparable though even more detailed description than had Slater. There were then “85 padiyals in this village”, he said. In 1981, almost half a century later, Guhan and Mencher identified a total of 36 padiyals, 22 of them being in the employ of the BL. These men were mostly older, wanting somewhat lighter work, and they were engaged in the operation of pumpssets, in “watch and ward” and such duties as feeding cattle and cleaning cattle sheds. The researchers could find no evidence on the existence of debt bondage (an observation reflecting the apparent weakening of the padiyal system, that was in accordance with others made at around the same time in Tamil Nadu, as Guhan and Mencher noted. See also Harriss 1982). Padials were then being paid 30 Madras measures (mm) of paddy per month, with seven and a half measures of ragi, plus an annual payment of two bags of paddy – somewhat higher rates than those recorded by both Slater and Veeraraghavan. By 2008, the “semi-servile system of labour” had declined still further and only five padials were still employed, all of them by BL. He himself says that he employs only pump watchmen, who may be paid in cash at the rate of Rs 35-40 per day plus one quarter measure of ragi, or cash of Rs 900-1100 per month plus a meal, or in kind at a rate of one bag of paddy per month, plus one meal per day and three bags of paddy at the time of harvest. These rates were confirmed by a woman in the colony who told us that her husband, working as a pump watchman for BL, was being paid 2 mm/day (which is equivalent to one 75 kg bag of paddy per month). Wage levels for these permanent laborers do seem to have been increased since 1981, but it is very striking that they still work out to be equivalent only to about the 3 kg of cereals per day that it is suggested has been the historical level of payment to day labourers in agricultural economies across different continents (according to sources cited by Guhan and Mencher).

The authors of the 1981 study attempted to compare wage rates for agricultural operations as these could be deduced from the 1937 study with those then prevalent in Iruvelpattu. They concluded that wage rates for transplanting and weeding of paddy had declined or at best stagnated, though it was possible that those for harvesting (the most important source of income during the year for many agricultural labourers) had increased slightly. This, even though Veeraraghavan had noted in 1937 that, “wage rates here are very low”. In 1981, the general wage level worked out as being equivalent to 3.4 kg of rice for men and half that for women. In other words, wage levels seemed to have remained at the historic mean.

It is now quite difficult to compare agricultural wage levels with those obtaining in the past, because of the changes that have taken place with the extensive mechanisation of cultivation, including harvesting and threshing by combine harvester, as well as tractor ploughing. The best single comparator is the general daily rate for “coolie” labour which in 1981 stood at Rs 5 for men and Rs 2.5 for women. These rates, we saw, were equivalent to about 3.4 kg and 1.75 kg of paddy, respectively. The rates for this kind of work (and plucking seedlings from nurseries for men, and bunding, and for transplanting paddy and weeding for women) in 2008 stood at Rs 60 plus a meal, valued at Rs 5, for men, and Rs 35 for women – probably for a shorter working day. These are equivalent to 6-7 kg of paddy for men and 3-3.5 kg for women.

Those now few labourers who are employed in harvesting operations – reaping corners of the fields that are beyond the reach of the combine harvesters, bagging and carrying – are paid 5 mm per day (about 6 kg) in place of the 3 mm or 4 mm (for a longer day, in this case) that were paid in the past. These rates have increased, therefore, though not by as much as the general coolie rate. In real terms agricultural wage rates have roughly doubled, moving well beyond the long-run historic mean – and the complaints of the Reddiars and others in the caste village about the costs of labour and “labour problems” are understandable.

It is reasonable to suppose that wage levels in agriculture have been driven up by the general tightening of labour markets with the increased availability of non-farm employment. The average daily rates that we have recorded in other labouring occupations are all higher than the daily rate in agriculture in the village: sugar cane cutting, about Rs 100 per day; construction labourers, Rs 80-100 (this is the rate for “helpers”; the rate for masons was Rs 250); brick kiln labour, Rs 150 per day for a husband and wife team; work in the Koyambedu market in Chennai, Rs 200 per day over 20 days in a month; even for women from the colony employed as day labourers for cleaning beer bottles in a nearby government store the daily rate was Rs 50 plus the cost of their bus fares.

The basic agricultural wage rates increased again to Rs 70 for men and Rs 40 for women in January 2009, apparently reflecting labour shortages. Given wage levels outside village agriculture, and given, too, that employment under the NREGS has been available in the village at rates of Rs 65 per day (on average; Rs 80 was sometimes paid to some people, depending upon the amount of work that they did) for both men and women, it might even be found surprising that agricultural wage rates have not increased by more than has been the case.
What, however, of the duration and continuity of employment? Guhan and Mencher report that they were only able to obtain “broad orders of magnitude”, and their estimations, based on a careful consideration of seasonal variations, suggested that the average employment for men and women taken together, could be placed at 180 days per year. They thought that it was possible that the availability of employment had increased as a result of the introduction of the green revolution technology, though there were also off-setting trends due to mechanisation, even at that time. Our own enquiries – again about “broad orders of magnitude”, taking seasonal variation into account – suggested that the average number of days of employment available in village agriculture has definitely declined, unsurprisingly given the extent of mechanisation of operations. If the average was 180 days in 1981, it is of the order of 100-120 days now, so that even though daily real wages have improved, average real incomes from agriculture cannot have improved by very much. According to Guhan and Mencher’s calculations, the annual income for an agricultural labouring couple would have been of the order of 900 kg paddy (180 days × (3.5+1.7 kg)) in 1981. The equivalent at present is of the order of 1,000-1,100 kg (100/110 days × (7+3.4 kg)). This will supply the minimum staple food requirements of an average household of 4.7 members, which is equivalent to about four standard consumption units. Those depending solely on agricultural labour, therefore, are still living at or below the poverty line.

Poverty/Levels of Living: Guhan and Mencher reached the striking conclusion that even taking the much lower poverty line that they calculated on the basis of local information, than the then official level, all the agricultural labour households of Iruvelpattu were living below the line, and in all 62% of the village households (47% of caste Hindus, divided fairly equally between agricultural labourers and marginal cultivators, and all the dalit households) were below the line. Reproducing their method with 2008 prices (see the Box) we find a similar result, and think that it is likely that many of the agricultural labour households of the village (now 26% of all village households, and 50% of dalit households) are living at or below the poverty line – as we also argued above. Many of the marginal cultivators may be added to these numbers. Still, the doubling of real wages in agriculture shows, we believe, the impact of the availability of higher paying employment outside local agriculture, and that there can be no doubt that levels of living have improved over the past quarter century. The breaking of the long-run stagnation of agricultural wages is a very striking change since 1981 by which time, it would seem, there had been relatively little change in levels of living since Slater’s survey in 1916. Taking into account a multi-dimensional view of poverty, as well, levels of living have surely been improved by the better availability of drinking water, of healthcare and of education, of infrastructure in the form of roads and electricity, and as a result of state provisioning through the ICDS, the public distribution system – especially, with 20 kg of ration rice per month available to all ration card holders at Rs 2 per kg, or now Rs 1 per kg, following the reduction in the rate by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 2009 – and latterly as a result of the introduction of the NREGS. This is no panglossian conclusion. Poverty remains a great problem. But we should recognise the advances that have been made over the past 25 years.

2 Landlord Power and Caste Politics

2.1 Village Society and the Village Polity

As Slater described it, as we mentioned earlier, the village seemed to be “self-supporting” and quite self-contained, with a sufficient range of artisans and specialists as to meet most essential functions, from its own resources. He might have been influenced by the notion of the “village republic” invented by earlier generations of colonial administrators, but his account suggests that this was not an entirely inappropriate idea. By 1937, Veeraraghavan’s account gives less of an impression of self-containment, but it also supplies details about the customary payments made to carpenter and blacksmith, potter, washerman and barber, for their services. There are definite hints here of the relationships between service castes and landowners that anthropologists used to describe as “the jajmani system”, or what was observed in practice in a village in North Arcot in the early 1970s, where the system of customary relationships was known as talaimurai (the word murai meaning order). At that time (Harriss 1982) carpenter and blacksmith, washerman, barber, village temple priest, and the “untouchable” (dalit) village servants, were all still paid customary amounts on the cultivators’ threshing floors, as well as being paid for their particular functions or specialist roles in life cycle rituals, while the washerman, at least, would take food from cultivators’ houses each day. The idea of talaimurai was familiar to some of our informants in Iruvelpattu in 2008, but it was evident that the system had broken down. Not least the shift to mechanised harvesting meant that most cultivators no longer threshed out their grain on a threshing floor, and – so one of the Reddiars said – servants did not like to come to cultivators’ houses for payment. The blacksmith now makes locks, the carpenter has a furniture polishing business, both of them outside; the washerman will still do pressing for payment but not laundry. These former village service providers do still undertake their specialist ritual roles, for payment, but the more generalised system of relationships of dependent service has ceased to operate.
In a number of other ways, too, the hierarchical organisation of village society that lent a certain kind of “village solidarity”, has ceased to be. In the past it seems that it was the case in Iruvelpattu, as was observed in the North Arcot village, Harriss studied in the early 1970s, that the members of the cheri participated in the main village festival, which takes place in the Tamil month of aadi, as well as celebrating their own comparable festival centred on the goddess Mariyamman (ibid). In the case that Harriss observed the organisation and the events of the festival clearly reflected the social hierarchy of the village as a whole. But in Iruvelpattu by 2008, the dalits were no longer participants in the festival of the caste village,\(^{11}\) and celebrated only their own Mariyamman festival.

Another aspect of the old village hierarchy according to some of the accounts of ethnographers, was the existence of a traditional political institution, the panchayat, sometimes labelled as the uur panchayat, which functioned as a decision-making body and acted to resolve disputes. There has been some debate amongst anthropologists about these bodies, and one view was that they were more an expression of the power of the dominant caste than being in any, even very restricted sense, a representative institution. Such traditional panchayats have been observed in operation in villages in Karnataka by Kripa Ananthpur (Ananthpur and Moore 2007). Of Iruvelpattu, however, Veeraraghavan wrote in 1937 that there was no panchayat; and in 2008, though the idea of the uur panchayat was clearly familiar to people, it was said that the voice of the Reddiar landlord, BL, had always been decisive. These days serious disputes are more likely to be referred to the police. Amongst the dalits, there is a panchayat, however, constituted by the naattaanmai, or elders, of each of the major lineages, who meet together to settle disputes and to run the affairs of the Mariyamman temple.

Another traditional village institution had some vitality in Iruvelpattu. This was the common fund, described as follows by Slater in 1918:

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In spite of the social and religious severance between pariah and caste-man, and the economic severance between landowner and paudal, the general impression made on my mind during my four days in Eruvellipet, was that of a spirit of local solidarity. I heard no mention of what is so frequent, the division of the village into two hostile factions. It was said that the munsiff [the Reddiar landlord, we understand] was able to deal with such disputes as occurred. There seemed to be no trouble about the administration of the common fund of the village, the very existence of which is a testimony to the existence of this village solidarity. It is derived partly from the sale of an exclusive right to catch fish in the tank to one villager, and of that to cut reeds, which grow extensively in the tank, and which are valued for thatching, to another (Slater 1918: 14).

The more important source of money for the common fund was, however, the auctioning of rights to the produce of the tamarrind and palmyra trees from the roadside, the profit from which amounted to about Rs 200 per year, quite a sum in those days. The fund was used “to promote the economic well-being of the village, by religious ceremonies which secure favourable seasons, and by presents bestowed where the giving of presents is deemed a profitable investment”.

In 1937, it seems from Veeraraghavan’s account, the common fund still functioned, though what had been the most important source of money, payments for rights to the produce of the trees, no longer accrued to the village common fund but to “the [official] Local Fund”, and the fishing rights described were those to fish just in the spring channel. The income from the auctioning of rights to fish in the tank was said to be “divided among those who pay the tax [the reference is to a fishing rent, paid, presumably to the public works department under whose authority the tank came], in proportion to the amount they pay”, and quite what happened to the income from the reeds growing in the tank is not clear from the account given. It seems from Veeraraghavan’s description that quite a large share of the expenses of religious ceremonies in the village was being borne by the Reddiar landlord, described as “the Kambattan Reddiar” (BL).

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**Loss of Common Resources**

Forty years later, by the time of Guhan and Mencher’s study, the passage away from a village common fund had evidently gone further. The two authors concluded that “BL has, more or less, become a one-man version of the common fund that Slater had taken to be striking evidence of village solidarity, in the process replacing ‘solidarity’ with hegemony”. Customary rights to fish in the tank, though it was a government source of irrigation, were recognised but in favour of 17 shareholders. The shares had been bought and sold over time at a rate, in 1981, of Rs 2,500 each, having almost doubled in price over a decade, and by that time 12 of the 17 were owned by BL.\(^ {12}\) Another one and a quarter belonged to a landowner in another village; three-quarters to a Vanniyar rich peasant; one was allotted to the kambakaran; one was shared by four dalit families (probably, in fact, the four lineages of the Paraiyars of Iruvelpattu); and one by three families in the caste village. By this time BL had succeeded, quite how Guhan and Mencher were unable to say, in securing exclusive rights to the reeds (vithal) of the tank. He allowed villagers to cut them for their own use and at their own cost, though only with his written permission, auctioning the remainder and earning around Rs 10,000 from this source over a two-year period. By this time, too, the panchayat union auctioned usufructuary rights to the roadside trees. Guhan and Mencher calculated that, had the common fund still existed in the way that Slater had described, it would have been deriving roughly Rs 15,000 each year from each of the three sources of income (fishing rights, rights to the reeds, and from the auctioning of usufructuary rights to the produce of the trees). In 2008, the fishing rights had passed over to the control of the irrigation panchayat;\(^ {13}\) there was no longer said to be much local demand for reeds, and people were allowed to cut them with the permission of the irrigation panchayat; and such common fund as existed was built up partly from the sale of the invasive shrub prosopis juliflora, now widely used as fuel, from the tank bed, and through “collection” (voluntary contributions) at the time of festivals. It was said that the fisheries department of government had claimed the fishing rights, on the grounds that it was the department that seeded the tank, and that they had then been transferred to the irrigation panchayat. What were once common resources have, through the 20th
century been first partially privatised and then substantially taken over by the state.

**Landlord Power:** Even if, as seems possible, Slater had a somewhat rose-tinted view of “village solidarity” in 1916, there is a clear evidence of the existence of elements of a village community ordered by the caste hierarchy, under the dominance of the Reddiars. There was an overlap between the authority that the Reddiars held by virtue of their economic dominance, and that deriving from the state for the Reddiars also supplied the village headman (the munsiff). BL himself was the munsiff from some time in the early 1950s until 1967, when he had to resign on becoming an MLA, and the position passed to another of the Reddiars. The authority of the Reddiars is reflected in the title given locally to the family of BL, that of the Kambattan Reddiar. The meaning of “kambattan” is obscure. It may mean something like “the one on a pedestal”, but it was also said to mean “the one who pays taxes”. The big house that BL still occupies when he is in the village, rather than in his house in one of older, once very fashionable parts of the city of Chennai, is known as “the Collector’s House”. This might perhaps be a reference to the fact that district collectors stayed in the house on their tours (it was originally a guest house, constructed in 1901, when the main house was on the other side of the road), but it could also be a reference to the role of the Reddiar landlords in the collection of the land revenue.

The account given by Guhan and Mencher shows just how extensive was the power of BL in 1981, in spite of land reform legislation and the years of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government. He owned at least a third, and perhaps more, of the village lands, and about a third of the private irrigation assets of the village so that he alone had succeeded in privatising an important share of the groundwater resources of Iruvelpattu. He employed a large number of the agricultural labourers of the village, a good number of them still as padials. BL also accounted for about 70% of the land that was then still held on lease, much of it given out to people who worked for him; he owned the land sites of about half of the dalit colony and had succeeded in resisting efforts to grant the rights to their house sites to these people, while he had also blocked efforts to secure milk cattle loans for the dalits under the Integrated Rural Development Scheme of the time; as we have seen he owned what had once been common resources – the fish and the reeds in the tank. Thanks to his influence wage rates were lower in Iruvelpattu than in surrounding villages. He owned 35 or so houses, and was the landlord for the salaried people temporarily resident in the village. Important visitors to the area were always his guests. The official panchayat of the village that functioned between 1957 and 1977 had had only one president during all this time, a man who worked for BL, and all the other members of the panchayat were his nominees, including the two Harijan members. The village accountant, the karnam, was an old client of his. He himself was a strong supporter of Congress, and had served as the Congress MLA for the constituency between 1967 and 1971, and as the District Congress President between 1974 and 1980. For a long time, he was able to forbid the flying of the flags of any of the other parties, and to ban the wearing of a dhoti with a red and black border, the colours of the DMK, though this had changed a little by 1981, by which time the Congress Party in the state had to ally with others.

On the other side of this picture of extensive, almost absolute authority, there is the evidence of BL’s patronage of the village in Guhan and Mencher’s account. He always contributed substantially to the costs of temple renovation and of the running of village festivals, even in the dalit colony. As we mentioned he had secured the public health centre (PHC) for the village, and the veterinary sub-centre during the time in which he was the MLA; he had been instrumental in getting the new school building, and the piped water supply for the caste village. Unsurprisingly, given the extent of his authority, he was also turned to for help on different occasions, including for the resolution of personal disputes. It was customary for him to give half a bag of paddy on the occasions of weddings and funerals in the caste village. Much of this benevolence – paternalistic patronage – of course, did not extend to the cheri, but he clearly “looked after” his people there, as we noted, ensuring compliance, while still enforcing rigid caste discrimination. Still in 1981 dalits were not permitted to wear chappals in the village street or to enter the teashop if a caste Hindu was present, or to receive water in a cup.

**Change and Continuity**

As Guhan and Mencher suggested would be the case, it is very interesting to reflect on what has changed over the last quarter of the 20th century. BL is still there, of course, and we have seen that he still owns a large share of the village lands, though he himself admits to having sold off land gradually. He no longer leases out land and he employs few padials, describing them only as irrigation watchmen (which may be fair). He still owns houses but lets most of them out on a grace and favour basis, and he has had to surrender his control over house sites in the dalit colony. Dalits are no longer forbidden from entering the village wearing chappals, though it is likely that few of them venture across the main road unless they absolutely have to – the separation between the two worlds described by Slater remains. BL no longer controls the formerly common resources of fish and reeds from the tank. His authority is no longer absolute and he can no longer command labour as he once did. This substantially accounts for his decisions to cut out sugar cane cultivation and to switch over large areas of his lands to casuarina production. Yet, it is still the case that he is able to pay lower wages than anyone else, or to secure an extra hour of work for the same rate as that paid by others. And he still exercises significant influence in village politics. If he had succeeded by 1981 in replacing village solidarity by hegemony, BL had lost his hegemonic position by 2008, yet, still held considerable power. With the apparently final loss of power by the Congress in government in Tamil Nadu, he no longer, nor for a long time, had such good contacts with the administration as once was the case. And yet, on one morning when we were talking with him and the panchayat union chairman arrived to pay his respects, BL kept the man waiting outside until such time as our discussion had come to an end.

**Village Panchayat and the Gram Sabha:** The panchayati raj system of local self-government has been revived in Tamil Nadu...
following the passage of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1993. The village panchayat, with six members and a president, is now reserved as one to be headed by a member of the scheduled castes, and the last elections were held in 2006. There are now four Vanniyar members and two dalits, and the president is a dalit widow (whose husband worked in the office of the agricultural extension office at the block headquarters – his position now having been taken over by his eldest son). According to her own account and that of others, there were large numbers of candidates put up for the position of president in the 2006 elections (some said 16, others 13), with different ones from amongst them being supported by different people from the caste village. There seems to have been a deliberate policy of proliferation in order to divide and rule. The president – supported covertly, or perhaps not, by BL – spoke of having sold land in order to finance her campaign for election, of having given Rs 100 per vote, and of having spent one lakh on liquor. By 2008, the dalit colony was rife with stories of her corruption (though in supposedly “face-to-face” village society, such accusations appear always to be common).

The upshot of the elections and of subsequent events is that the village as a whole is divided into what are effectively two factions. There are supporters of the panchayat president, in both the colony and the caste village, and they are opposed by those of the vice-president, a Vanniyar. We saw this division in a meeting of the gram sabha, called by the president, following the instruction of the district collector and the panchayat union, in October 2008. The meeting began at about 10 in the morning in the open space beside the village school and it was attended by about 150 people, including some Vanniyars and more dalits, perhaps because the latter had been encouraged to attend by the promise of Rs 50 from the president on the previous day. Several panchayat union officials were in attendance, and four policemen. The meeting became noisy and contentious right from the start when demands were made to have the agenda for the meeting announced. Then the vice-president, a Vanniyar, demanded to know from the president what had happened to the house taxes that she had collected. He claimed that she had collected Rs 16,000 but – brandishing papers in support of his point – he claimed that she had deposited only Rs 5,000. At this point the meeting degenerated into a shouting match between the supporters of the president and those of the vice-president, with dalits on both sides. Efforts by the panchayat officials and by the police to restore order failed, and eventually, the crowd dispersed. Later, in the day the president went into Villupuram to file a case with the police against the vice-president and his supporters.14

It may have been true at the time of Slater’s visit to Iruvelpattu that the village was perhaps unusual in not being divided into factions, but it is now. The division of the panchayat allows space in which BL can continue to exercise power.

Dalit Politics and a ‘Social Revolution’ in Iruvelpattu? Slater noted the very clear distinction between the “pariah village” and the caste village of Iruvelpattu, and we have seen that it is a division that has persisted through into the new century. Guhan and Mencher in concluding their study in 1981, summarised the disparities between the caste Hindus and those they referred to as the Harijans of Iruvelpattu, disparities that are the more striking for the fact that the caste Hindus in this case are mostly Vanniyars, who are classified as a “Most Backward Class”, and whose political party the Pattali Makkal Katchi regularly proclaims the poverty and the disabilities that are suffered by the members of this numerous caste community of northern Tamil Nadu. At that time, the dalits/Harijans owned as little as 3% of the village lands, as little of other agricultural assets and very few of them were cultivators; hardly any of them owned even the sites on which they had their poor houses; and while the literacy rates across the village as a whole were poor they were “abyssmal” amongst the Harijans, and especially amongst the women... facts that we have recounted in this paper. But we have also shown that over the past quarter century some very major changes have taken place. To speak of a “social revolution” as having taken place is certainly to overstate the case, but some historically profound changes have come about. The dalits of Iruvelpattu now do own a little more land than before, and one or two of them have been able to acquire significant productive assets; they own their house sites now; fewer of them are dependent upon agricultural wage work, or upon the grace and favour of BL; their literacy levels have risen very significantly, and the gap between them and the caste Hindus with respect to literacy has been greatly improved; they no longer tolerate the kind of day to day discrimination to which they were subject (though this is, of course, not to say that discrimination has disappeared or that they are not still a subject to all manner of abuse). Times have changed, though conditions in the cheri of Iruvelpattu still make a mockery of the notion of “India shining”.

Tightening of Rural Labour Markets
A change has been driven significantly by the tightening of rural labour markets that has come about, with greater physical mobility, better information and more education, and the opening up of some new employment opportunities. The changes are expressed most clearly in what we consider to be the most striking of all, which is the increase in real agricultural wages, in spite of the relative stagnation of the agricultural economy. At last, wages have broken through the historic ceiling on agricultural wages of around the equivalent of 3 kg of raw foodgrains per day, that showed the power of the dominant controllers of agricultural surplus to depress real wages (Tomlinson 1988). That power has at last been broken. We should not neglect the role that government policy has played in this, not by any direct intervention in the labour market but through welfare provision, especially through maintaining a public distribution system with more or less universal access, and now through the introduction of the NREGS (about which landowners complain bitterly, arguing that this scheme, in combination with the availability of ration rice at very low prices reduces all incentives for people to work).

But the changes that have come about have to do not only with the consequences of the tightening of the rural labour market. There is also politics. Guhan and Mencher explain that soon after the completion of their fieldwork, early in 1982, there came about an unprecedented mobilisation of the dalits of Iruvelpattu. This
was as the result of the return to the village of a young man
whom they describe as “One of the Harijan boys, an unemployed
SSLC …”, who, with the support of his educated brothers, organised
an Ambedkar Sangam, and succeeded – against the opposition of the BL – in taking out a padyatra to the office of the district
collector in Cuddalore, and presenting a petition with a set of
demands. These were the long-standing demands of the dalits,
going back even to Slater’s time – for their own school, for house
sites, for a proper drinking water supply, for repairs to the road to
the colony and to their few street lights, for repairs to their temple,
for a balwadi – a crèche where the many working dalit women
could leave their children, and for adult education. After this it
seemed that BL had at least partially acquiesced in the existence
of the sangam and promised – and in fact gave – funds for the repair
of the temple. It remained to be seen, said the researchers,
whether this dose of “opium to the people” would work.

Has it? Or, has the political mobilisation of the dalits continued
and deepened? The answer to both these questions is perhaps the
vague one of “a bit”. This is to say that the dalits have continued
to assert themselves much more than in the past but that those
who led the Ambedkar Sangam – who are members of the Repub-
liean Party of India (RPI) – have not succeeded in realising all
their aims. They pursued a case against the Reddiar over house
sites from 1985 through to 1995 before they finally won, and as
we have said, secured the allocation of, in the end 250 pattas. In
1984, they put up a candidate in the elections of that year to the
legislative assembly, which was an action that in the end pro-
voked an open confrontation with Vanniyars. If Guhan and Mencher were right about the absence of any major conflict
between the two communities this situation changed in 1984. A
clash came about over the removal of an RPI pandal and flag. In
the upshot the cheri was attacked by Vanniyars, but the latter
were then encircled by the dalits, with reinforcement from Villu-
puram. Ever since then the dalit activists have kept up their op-
opposition to the Reddiar and to the Vanniyars whom he has sup-
ported in successive elections. But they have not been able to
maintain a united front, as is shown up all too clearly in the story
of the division of the panchayat and of the factionalism that ex-
tends into the cheri. So the dalit political mobilisation has been
compromised. Yet, we should not underestimate the significance
of the change in attitudes amongst the cheri people that have been encouraged by this political activism, and have contributed
in some measures to what the larger Reddiar and Vanniyar land-
owners describe as “the labour problem”, and the breaking of
that historic ceiling on real agricultural wages.

3 Conclusions

This short account of the history of one village in Tamil Nadu
through the 20th century presents a kind of kaleidoscope. Viewed
from one angle little seems to have changed: the built environ-
ment of the village in 2009 is not radically different from that
observed by Slater in 1916; Iruvelpattu remains an agricultural
village centred on paddy cultivation; the highway still marks a
boundary between the two different worlds of the caste village
and the cheri, and caste identities remain a powerful factor in
daily life and in politics. The dalits are still heavily dependent
upon agricultural labour for their livelihoods, and may be sub-
ject to, still, to all manner of abuse. Poverty may not be as acute
as it was but levels of living are still very low; and the village re-
mains subject to the dominance of the same Reddiar family that
owns less of the village lands than it used to, no doubt, but still a
very major share of them. Viewed from another side, however, it
appears a very different world. Access to services has been trans-
formed by state investments in schools, in health services, in
drinking water supply and in electricity. There has been an
extraordinary diversification of employment, linked with the
mobility of the population in India’s most urbanised state; and
these changes have provided some of the conditions for the em-
powerment of the dalits. Another way of looking at the recent
history of the village is to say that it reflects all the contradictions
of present-day Tamil Nadu: a state with a comparatively high
level of public provisioning (save in regard to sanitation), and
relatively high levels of “human development”, but one in which
old power structures remain deeply entrenched, and the disabili-
ties of “untouchability” remarkably persistent, in spite of many
years of government by political parties that descend from a
leader, Periyar, who espoused an agenda of social reform. No
great social transformation is in evidence.

Iruvelpattu is, of course, not a “representative” village, though
to does fairly represent the general failure of the imple-
mentation of land reform in Tamil Nadu. But here too, as was
generally the case in the state in the 20th century, the agricul-
tural economy was penetrated by capitalist relations of produc-
tion, and these relations were internalised in the organisation of
small-scale farming. “Landlordism” in the classic sense – with
the dominant controller of land appropriating surplus from ten-
ant cultivators – persisted in Iruvelpattu perhaps longer than
elsewhere, but it had passed well before the end of the century,
even if the landlord remained powerful. Guhan and Mencher’s
account of it from more or less the height of the “green revolu-
tion” years, shows that the village saw trends that were observed
very widely, as a small class of rich peasants developed, here
amongst the Vanniyars.

At the time that Guhan and Mencher undertook their study,
C T Kurien published a major analysis of the dynamics of rural
transformation in Tamil Nadu, in which he argued that the state
had experienced significant growth in the agricultural economy
“without major structural changes”. He went on, however, to say
that “in another sense a quiet structural transformation has been
going on in rural Tamil Nadu. The main feature of this transfor-
mation is the tendency of small farmers to leave land and farm-
ing to join the ranks of the rural proletariat” (1980: 389). In other
words, he thought that a process of proletarianisation was taking
place, and associated it with a tendency for mass poverty to per-
sist and even increase, partly because of the decline in the real
wages of agricultural labourers. These trends have only partly
been observed in Iruvelpattu over the last quarter century. Prole-
tarianisation is perhaps reflected in the increased numbers of
landless households, but small-scale farming has continued to
reproduce itself, and there are indications as we have shown, of
an historic shift in agricultural wage rates. What has rather gone
on in the village, as has been the case very widely indeed across

the world, is what Bernstein refers to as “the fragmentation of labour” (2004: 204). As he puts it: “Classes of labour in the conditions of today’s ‘South’ have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive – and typically increasingly scarce – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure ‘informal sector’ (‘survival’) activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment” (2010, ms) – “spread across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural” (2004: 205). This describes rather well the increasingly complex, highly diversified ways in which the very mobile people of Iruvelpattu secure their livelihoods across a geographically wide range of locations – reflected in the fact that, walking round the village on most days, one sees large numbers of houses locked up with no-one there. The village is just one, possibly quite a minor site, in the livelihood spaces of village people these days.

What may distinguish Iruvelpattu and rural Tamil Nadu generally from other parts of “today’s south”, including much of the rest of India, is the level of state intervention in the interests of social security – through primary healthcare provision, and schools in which teachers are actually present, and through the maintenance of a universal public distribution system, as well now as the operation of the NREGS. These have made for some improvement in well-being in the last quarter century (as Djurfeldt et al also find: 2008) and for such political change as has occurred – and that has played a part, in turn, in ensuring the delivery of welfare provisioning.

NOTES
1 We note some renewal of interest in the pages of the Tamil Nadu Communist Political Weekly, with the publication of articles such as that, with particular reference to Tamil Nadu, by Djurfeldt et al (2008) – with the findings which we find many similarities in Iruvelpattu. With regard especially to village studies, the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (www.agrarianstudies.org), is carrying out an ambitious programme of work in all the major states.
2 Their limitations include the lack, in some cases, of comparability of data across survey points, and in general, the fact that the five villages in the set – unsurprisingly, given that the initial selection was based on students studying economics in Madras in 1916 – are all relatively well connected, with significant higher caste communities: bramins in two of the villages, bramins and naidus in another, nayakars in one other, and reddiars in Iruvelpattu.
3 The study, including a complete listing of household and a sample survey of the economics of cultivation, was carried out in 2006 and in the earlier part of 2009 with the assistance of a team involving G Jothi, who was one of those who worked with Guhan and Merchant in 1981, Kamar, Lenin and Anbu Pakyaraj. We are very grateful to them all. We ourselves visited the village for several days at a time on three occasions in 2007-08.
4 Up until the early 1980s, when the current system of village administration through a lower tier of civil servants, the village administrative officers (VAOs), was introduced in Tamil Nadu, this administration was in the hands of village headmen and village accountants, or karnams, who usually came from a particular caste community whose hereditary occupation it was. These village officers were in place in the coloni-al period, and though the British attempted to impose the bungalow system of recruitment early in the 20th century, in practice these positions were usually occupied according to the hereditary principle. Thus, in Iruvelpattu, the position of village headman seems always to have been held in the family of BL.
5 Guhan and Merchant present convincing reasons for thinking this figure was somewhat exagger-ated, and suggest that it is more likely to have been around 150 acres.
6 These figures were cross-checked as far as possible, referring to land records with the advice of the former karnam (see the preceding note) of the village.
7 The rate of Rs 60 – meal was for work from 9-12 for men, and that of Rs 35 for work for women from 9-1. The wage rate for a full working day (9-5) for men was Rs 150 with a meal.
8 These conversions are based on the prices of Rs 500-600 per bag of paddy that obtained in 2008 for paddy of middling quality. For a finer variety of paddy the rates were much higher.
9 Known locally as the “One Hundred Days Work Scheme”, NREGA was introduced into Iruvelpattu in July 2008, when we saw work going on in the de-silting of the village tank. Reportedly in this first phase, the project went on for 18 days and generated 3,000 person days of employment at Rs 65 per day (and so cost about Rs 2 lakh). Both the caste Hindus of the village (most of whom – the Vanniyars – are scheduled as Most Backward Class) and dalits participated. Eighty per cent of the participants were women (the rate of Rs 65 per day being unattractive for men). A further, more substantial project, for clearing the channel supplying the tank, was started in September 2008.
10 Our calculations here are as follows. Following Guhan and Merchant we take it that the daily calorie requirements of a working adult (one “con-sumption unit”) can be supplied by 400 gm of rice. We assume, like them, that the average household includes members who are not full consumption units, being young or old, non-working members, and so we take that the household includes four consumption units, therefore, requiring 1.6 kg of rice per day. The 1,050 kg of paddy that we think is the likely average annual income equivalent of the combined wages of an agricultural labouring household will produce about 700 kg of rice, which means that the household will have available 1.9-2.0 kg of rice per day, about 20% more than the require-ment of cereals. This is pretty much the poverty line according to most ways of thinking about these measures.
11 Apart from the main festival the other principal festivals of the caste village of Iruvelpattu are, now as in 1916, Vinayaka Chaturti, celebrated in the month of avani, dedicated to Vinayaka, and panguni utiram, dedicated to Murugan.
12 In 2008, however, BL told us that there had been 14 shares in the fishing rights, 11 of then held by Reddiars, one by the cheri, one by the Vanniyars, and one by “outsiders”.
13 This is a new institution set up under a World Bank-funded programme. It did not seem to be functioning during the period of our research.
14 We are grateful to G Jothi for this description.

REFERENCES

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