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Back from hell. Marked for ever? – Trajectory of a Dalit caste in south India  
Paper for the Seminar for Venkatesh B. Athreya in Chennai, January 2016  
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2016

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lindberg, S. (2016). *Back from hell. Marked for ever? – Trajectory of a Dalit caste in south India: Paper for the Seminar for Venkatesh B. Athreya in Chennai, January 2016.*

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# Back from hell. Marked for ever? – Trajectory of a Dalit caste in south India<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This is an attempt at a sociological history of the Madharis, an ex-untouchable caste in the Tirupur region of Tamil Nadu, over the past half century or so. In this dry area, the Madharis known by many as Chakkiliyars, were the leather workers who stitched the buckets for irrigation and handled the irrigation works essential for agricultural production. From a position as bonded village agricultural servants with customary duties and rights (*urimai*) and survival insurance, their position changed with the commercialisation of agriculture under British rule to one in which the majority were employed as permanent labourers on the larger farms.

With the advent of new technology, in this case mechanical pumps, the need for Madhari labour was reduced from the 1930s onwards. A severe drought from 1947 to 1953 spurred on the introduction of this technology and many Madharis were retrenched from their positions as permanent labourers. With no other work and income this was a period of great suffering for the Madhari community. Many of them converted to Christianity in the hope of material relief, which was hard to come by.

The main part of this paper describes the situation of Madharis in fifteen villages near Palladam and Tirupur in 1967.

The situation of this Madhari community at that time illustrates the working of Indian caste structures in the period following independence from colonial rule. This was an extreme case of stability and reproduction, in which the structural

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Judith Heyer, Somerville College, Oxford University, and Gunnel Cederlöf, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

underdog position of the community within the local system did not change despite the transformation of the overall environment.

Of late, however, the economic situation of the Madharis has changed for the better. With industrialisation and urbanisation, some Madharis and most members of other caste groups in the villages have left agricultural work. Scarcity of labour has benefitted the Madharis who continue to work as agricultural labourers and secure a much higher remuneration than 50 years ago.

The paper builds on my own fieldwork from 1967 and on a number of books, articles and research reports by other scholars who have focussed on the Madharis in this region over the last fifty years.

### *A sociological understanding of Indian caste structures*

Social stratification and durable inequality mechanisms (Tilly 1999) are a central part of sociological theory and understanding of unequal societies. Tilly's basic concepts of *exploitation*, *opportunity hoarding*, *emulation*, and *adaptation* are useful in analysing various social systems and their reproduction and change over time. They form basic mechanisms in the class, cultural, religious and political power structure of a society. Exploitation in his understanding is based on asymmetrical categorical pairs such as men/women, landowners/landless, white/black, capitalists/workers, 'in which some well-connected group of actors controls a valuable, labor-demanding resource from which they can extract returns only by harnessing the efforts of others, whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort' (Tilly 1999:86-87).

Subordinate groups can *hoard opportunities* that open up via, for example, new technology, and the utilisation of new resources, work migration, commerce, and war. Relations of exploitation are often *emulated* in institutions and organisations in society and *adapted* to the particular historical circumstances (local script) and need for legitimation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Tilly this is an analytical framework inspired both by Marx and Weber: "It builds a bridge from Max Weber on social closure to Karl Marx on exploitation, and back" (Tilly 1999:7). However, I think, as also concluded by Olin Wright (2015: 57-78), that the framework of *Durable Inequality* is as close to a Marxian position as you can get within a sociological analysis without explicitly recognising it.

Exploitation is not unidimensional. Partha Mukherji discusses four asymmetrical domains that are directly involved: economic exploitation, political oppression, cultural discrimination, and gender discrimination.<sup>3</sup> A fifth asymmetrical domain is eco-environmental exploitation, ‘with differential consequences for the stratified and hierarchical population’ (2012:43). In Mukherji’s understanding:

‘The five conceptual cross-cutting domains of asymmetries are not mutually exclusive; they are analytically differentiated but interdependent, interpenetrating and interfaced. They, particularly the first four, constitute the abstraction of society or social system as a system of asymmetries in social interaction, given that the ‘whole’ is greater than the sum of its domains and their structures of asymmetries’ (2012:44).

These two analytical frameworks provide very useful tools for understanding systems of exploitation and their dynamics.

They can be applied to Indian caste structures. Caste structures are similar to many other hierarchical structures of ethnic stratification in historical and contemporary societies.<sup>4</sup> In the “traditional” society dominant social groups in the form of castes have monopolies of wealth, land and political power by means of which they can exploit other castes.<sup>5</sup>

There is at least one unique feature which makes castes stand out. This is the endogamy practiced in all of the social strata within the Indian structure, the jati (caste). Intermarriage patterns make up the borderlines of caste, separating one group from another.<sup>6</sup> It gives a solid foundation to social stratification and sets limits to how social mobility can be achieved. This pattern facilitates the tracing of people from one generation to another. They are like “ring-marked migratory birds”, whose whereabouts are easy to track.

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<sup>3</sup> One can discuss whether gender is a separate domain or subsumed under the first three domains (as in Tilly’s analysis), cf. Mukherji 1999:51 note 23.

<sup>4</sup> For a classical view see Berreman 1963 and 1967.

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of caste structures concurs more or less with Surinder Jodhka’s perspectives as presented in his recent authoritative work on caste (2012) and how caste structures change over time (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Caste-like systems based on social closure are found in many other societies, like the nobility in feudal societies, the craft trade communities in Mediaeval Europe, especially the blacksmith communities there and in West Asia and North Africa. A more recent example is racial stratification in the United States, with its predominant pattern of endogamy. But the traditional Indian structures are the most extreme since every nook and corner is organised along endogamous lines.

Another central feature is untouchability, in which around one fifth of the Indian population is treated as outcaste and doubly exploited by all other members of society.<sup>7</sup> The underlying social mechanism is that of the relation between the Established and the Outsiders (Elias and Scotson 1994). The mechanism provides for a bottom line of social conformity, below which the evil opposite is posited. A hierarchy, a turning point and a privileged interpretation by the Elite of the Established keep up the rules and conformity to these. This is not to say that those thus out-casted subscribe to these interpretations (see below).

### *A regional phenomenon*

Caste was always a regional phenomenon and still is to a great extent as most researchers would agree. It is within historically emerging regions with the same political system, language, culture, ecology, and production systems that we find concrete social structures operating under this common “social logic”. However, since understandings of what constitute the central analytical dimensions vary, I will briefly define my view.

Within the caste system a few castes typically have a monopoly of the main productive assets – land, capital and/or cattle.

The central analytical concepts are class and ideology.

*Class:* The landed and dominant caste(s) on the one hand is grounded in the regional political and religious power structure (the Kingdom) and on the other hand makes up the elite in the local structure (the village). Most other castes are organised by the elite in a division of labour, in which caste is coupled with a particular occupation (priest, barber, dhobi, blacksmith, servants, tenants, agricultural labourers, etc.).<sup>8</sup> However, as we will see below, some castes may be organised on a regional basis through commerce and industry. In both cases ‘class is embedded in caste’ as expressed by Mukherji when analysing Srinivas’ perspectives on “traditional” caste structures (2012:29; Srinivas 2003:455).

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<sup>7</sup> Untouchability was a common phenomenon in feudal societies across the world. Visible remnants are outcaste groups in contemporary Japan and Romani people in south east Europe today.

<sup>8</sup> This is an idealised picture of the structure called the jajmani system. In border areas there were villages in which several castes owned the land and commanded the local structure. There were also villages in which one “caste” lived in more or less autonomy from the caste system, e.g., in tribal villages (Beck 1979:64-110).

*Ideology:* Each caste has a value on a scale from purity to impurity. The dominant caste and the Brahman priests guarded a “theory” of purity and the social order, in which each caste was assigned to a particular vocation and task.

Thus, “traditionally” there seemed to be a strong intersectionality and coherence between caste, class, culture and political power reproduced over time. Breaking out of caste structures was more or less impossible. Muslim or Christian conversions only resulted in new sub-castes with the old identity and status transferred to the new position. Conversions carried an element of opposition but this was soon quelled by the treatment meted out to converts by the dominant castes in the villages.

It must be stressed that caste structures were always changing over time. One decisive change came with British Census classifications from 1881 to 1931, when people were classified into castes and we also got the rather weird classification into *Forward Classes, Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes*. “Backward classes” included the local dominant and landowning castes in many regions!

The whole census operation gave an impression of stability to the social order, which was presumably never the case (cf. Jodhka 2012). Today, with the transformation into an urban-industrial service society, caste structures have undergone several changes and transformations but they are still resilient (Jodhka 2015).

The interaction between class and caste became crucial with the advent of capitalism. The almost bewildering variety of forms of exploitation that one finds within contemporary Indian capitalism is created within a caste society and the kind of gender relations that this implies (cf. Harriss-White and Heyer 2015). One is tempted to speak of varieties of “capitalism” or rather “Indian capitalisms”.

These principles and mechanisms will now be illustrated by the story of the Madhari position in 1967<sup>9</sup> and its subsequent transformation.

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<sup>9</sup> This is based on my Bachelor Thesis in Sociology in 1969: *The Madharis – An ex-untouchable caste in South India*. Lund: Department of Sociology (mimeo) and networking around this study. Thanks are due to late Rev. Olle Johnsson, Coimbatore and Uppsala, for all assistance with this fieldwork. Thanks are also due to my fieldworker friends and student colleagues Mr. E. Jacob, Mr. G. Kasturi, Mr. T.B. Sankaran, Mr. P. Solomon, and Mr. B. Oswald and not least to Mr. Khadiresan, our cook who fed us so well! Another important

## The Madharis

The Madharis are called Chakkiliyars (leather workers) by the other castes in the villages and belong to a larger caste of Arundathiyars, who used to be the tanners, scavengers and drumbeaters of many villages in Tamil Nadu.<sup>10</sup> They occupied an untouchable position<sup>11</sup> in the traditional society, everywhere segregated from and discriminated against by the rest of the community.

My main concern in 1967 was with the changes experienced by the Madharis during the last century, foremost of which was the gradual transition from a mainly local-centred economy to an ever growing market economy, with growing commercialisation of agriculture and with expanding industrial activities. During this period many Madharis had converted to Christianity. Another change was the coming of Independence, which meant that a government committed to social and economic progress had come into power and initiated development programmes. Education, medical services, local democracy, etc. were some of the new institutions beginning to affect daily village life.

### *The setting*

The geographical setting of the then Coimbatore District (part of what was historically known as Kongu Nad) is characterised by its altitude of ca 1000 feet above sea level, rather poor soils (red and black sand), low rainfall and a comparatively dry and mild climate. These factors have greatly influenced the development of the area. The feudal Zamindar system was never common here.<sup>12</sup> Most of the landowners themselves work manually on the land. Lack of surface water has forced farmers to dig deep wells in order to get water for irrigation. The main crops in 1967 were ragi, cholam and cumbu – all millets –

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source is Cederlöf's historical study of the Madharis and their employment relations since about 1900 (1997). In more recent time, in the 2010s, I have greatly benefited from interacting with Judith Heyer, Oxford University, going through my field material and discussing the changes over time studied by her up to the present.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief overview see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arunthathiyar>.

<sup>11</sup> Scheduled caste (SC) is an official term used for the lowest group of caste in the Hindu caste classification. Scheduled caste was used by the British with the intent of affirmative action to ameliorate their status in society. Gandhi, in an effort to improve their status introduced the term Harijans (children of God). Today, politically active SC groups call themselves Dalits (we the oppressed). In Tamil Nadu, however, the most commonly used term is SC.

<sup>12</sup> For information about the District, see Baliga 1966.

and groundnut. In the middle of the district there was an area with black soils, which was suitable for the cultivation of cotton.

Industrial growth in the district was impressive during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The textile industry dominated due to the dry climate and the availability of raw materials. What were originally subsidiary industries to the textile mills also developed into important industries along with smaller units of knitwear production. Other important industries included mechanical engineering producing pumps, electrical engines, etc. All of this led to rapid urbanisation. Between 1901 and 1961 the urban population increased from 7 per cent to 29 percent of the total population of Coimbatore district, which in 1961 was about 3.5 million.

The Gounder caste is the dominant caste in the district. Most of its members work as farmers and they also own most of the land. Next in importance is the Naidu caste, whose members were farmers, increasingly engaged in industrial production. Other important groups are the Chettiar and Mudaliar castes, most of whose members are weavers and merchants. There are three large Scheduled castes, the Paraiyars,<sup>13</sup> the Pallans,<sup>14</sup> and the Madharis. In 1967, most members of these castes worked as agricultural labourers. Many of them had recently converted to Christianity. In 1961, 94.6 per cent of the district population identified themselves as Hindus, 2.8 % Muslims, and 2.6 % Christians. The absolute numbers identifying themselves as Christians were about 100 000.<sup>15</sup>

Coimbatore District offered a rich background for a study of the changing status of a Scheduled Caste community in 1967. How had it fared in different social-economic contexts? What were the implications of the economic, institutional and religious changes taking place? To ascertain this I studied two different rural areas in Palladam taluk in the middle of the district.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Paraiyar called themselves Adi Dravidas in 1967. They were considered above the Madharis in the traditional caste hierarchy, sometimes owned land and had a somewhat better education than the Madharis.

<sup>14</sup> Devendra Kula Vellala is the gazetted name for SC Pallars in the Schedule, but most in the community use either Pallar Moopan or Devendra Pallan (Devendra for short) interchangeably.

<sup>15</sup> Census of India 1961, Volume IX-Madras, Part X – I, Volume –I, *District Census Handbook, Coimbatore*. Madras: Government Press.

<sup>16</sup> The fieldwork was carried out during April - June 1967. Altogether 415 male heads of Madhari households, 262 Hindus and 153 Christians, were interviewed. The number of respondents represented 84.7 % of the total population in the selected villages eligible for

The first area, a pure *rural area*, selected for study consisted of 10 typical mixed caste agrarian villages,<sup>17</sup> situated in a cluster 5- 10 miles south of the small town of Palladam. It was in one of the driest areas of the whole district, and agriculture, although dominant, was complemented by handloom weaving in some villages. The main crops were ragi, cholam and groundnut cultivated on well-irrigated and dry land. Gounders and Madharis were the most numerous castes. Madharis comprised 10 – 38 % of the population in the study villages. A small number of them owned small parcels of land and some had livestock. In four of these villages most of the Madharis had converted to Christianity.

The second area consisted of five *urban fringe villages*, situated a few miles south of the rapidly expanding town of Tirupur the population of which had increased from about 33 000 in 1951 to 100 000 in 1967. There were 5 big textile mills and some 350 small scale banyan industries. The economy of the fringe villages was very different from that of the agrarian villages. First of all agriculture was more diversified. Besides cereals, there was considerable cultivation of cotton and tobacco. There were also many non-agricultural activities including a fairly prosperous handloom weaving industry, and various other small scale industries. A large part of the population was employed in Tirupur.

In the fringe villages, the dominant castes were Gounders (farmers), Devanga Chettiars and Mudaliars (both handloom weaving castes). Apart from the relative strength of the weaving communities, the caste composition was similar to that in the villages south of Palladam. The Madharis constituted between 10 and 36 % of the population in each village. They had even less land and livestock compared to the first area. Quite a few of them had started work as day labourers in Tirupur town. In two of the five villages the majority of Madharis had become Christians.

Other castes in the two areas were represented in much smaller numbers. They included Brahmin (priests), Naidu (farmers), Pandaram (priests), Asari (carpenters), Udayar (potters), Boyár (house constructors), Navithan/Nasudar (barber), Vannan (washer men), Nadar (petty shop owners), Koravan (basket makers), Pullavannan (agricultural workers), Valayar (agricultural workers),

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interviews. The interviews were conducted with structured questionnaires. Other methods of investigation included group interviews and unstructured interviews with individuals on particular topics.

<sup>17</sup> The terms 'village' and 'hamlet' are used interchangeably in this study.

Kodangi (story tellers, beggars) and finally, the SC Adi Dravida/Paraiyar (agricultural workers).

The caste ranking system in these villages was very similar to that found by Brenda Beck in her study of the culture and social structure of the Coimbatore area (1972 and 1979). As in most rural areas, the landowning castes and merchant castes had an intermediate *Varna* position as Vaishya, but apart from this two parallel status- and prestige-systems existed side by side (Beck 1972).<sup>18</sup>

The main core was a *land based* caste system centred on Gounder landowners, their servant and artisan castes, and some of the SC agricultural labourers. In the local terminology these castes were called the *right hand castes*.

The other system consisted of *left hand castes*, which based their wealth on money and commerce and included the merchants and the weavers, and those castes subservient to these as servants and artisans. Since they were not locally but regionally grounded they were seen as outsiders or “immigrants”. A lot of social interaction involved struggles between castes belonging to the two prestige systems at the various levels.

### *Durable inequality*

The agriculturally based social system revolved around the two poles of Gounders as landowners and Madharis as workers, connected by interdependence and exploitation. The Gounder community were considered the lords of the land in Kongu Nad, carriers of an elaborate religious and kinship system tied to the soil.

From Tilly’s analytical point of view one can see here a stable structure of exploitation, “in which some well-connected group of actors (the landowning Gounders, *my addition*) controls a valuable, labor-demanding resource from which they can extract returns only by harnessing the efforts of others (the landless Madharis, *my addition*), whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort’ (Tilly 1999:86-87). This “internal” asymmetrical categorical pair (*Tilly’s term*) is then reinforced by *emulation* (Ibid. 95), that is, by the “use” of an “external” asymmetrical categorical pair of pure and impure – touchable and

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<sup>18</sup> This is according to Beck, 1972, but it has to be added that this terminology was hardly used in everyday language in Tamil Nadu.

untouchable, borrowed from the larger ideological framework of Brahmin theology.

A further aspect of the stability of this exploitation structure is the way it was *adapted* to local conditions and the way it was able to create vested interests in it among some of the Madhari labourers, through favourable conditions of annual employment in terms of remuneration, loans and gifts.

An additional crucial point in the structure was that the Madharis, though working as agricultural labourers for many generations, were still classified as a left hand caste, that is, as outsiders. Thus, not only were they marked as “untouchable” but they were also seen as outsiders,<sup>19</sup> as strangers not to be trusted like the “sons of the soil” – a double underdog position and stigmatisation! This made their relation to the Paraiyars very problematic. Though both castes were “untouchable”, the Paraiyars being classified as a right hand caste always considered themselves far above the Madharis, since the latter were outsiders and moreover worked with the skins of dead animals. One consequence was that while Madharis always were made to live in separate colonies (*cheris*), the Paraiyar houses lay adjacent to the other caste residences in the villages.

### *Madharis as “immigrants”*

According to legend, the Madharis originally came to Coimbatore District from Telugu country, along with the intermediate caste Naidus. Telugu is still their mother tongue, although most of them have learnt Tamil. Their traditional occupation was to take care of dead animals, tan the hides and skins and produce leather goods.

With the advent of extensive well irrigation in the Coimbatore region, the Madharis provided the leather buckets used in well. They also operated the bullocks used for pulling the water out of the wells irrigation (a method called *kavalai*). Moreover, they made several articles out of the leather - shoes, sandals and drums as well as buckets for irrigation. In addition they were assigned the task of cleaning and sweeping certain parts of village. Finally, they also served as drummers at religious ceremonies and were sent as messengers to inform relatives about deaths. There is evidence that Madharis, due to their special

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<sup>19</sup> With Telugu as their mother tongue, see below.

skills, enjoyed a rather secure and decent subsistence position in Tamil Nadu at the turn of the former century (Sujatha 2002).

The Madharis were always more or less landless and few of them had livestock. They worked for Gounders and other landowners. It is difficult to assess to what extent the so called *jajmani* system, i.e., a regular exchange of goods and services between different castes in a village, was ever fully practiced in the study villages, but remnants of it in the form of *urimai* existed as late as in 1967. *Urimai* denotes a system of obligations and rights among the castes in a village. In exchange for work for the dominant community, the various service and artisan castes were entitled to a share in the village produce, typically distributed during harvest (Cederlöf 1997:55-65). For the Madharis the main right, besides a share of the village produce, was to receive dead cows and buffaloes whose hides could be tanned.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought increased cultivation of commercial crops, for which more irrigation was needed and thus the need for Madhari labour. At the same time commercial estates in the hills as well as growing industries created labour markets with competition for the labour force. It was farmers with enough irrigated land who employed labourers on an annual basis in our case. The year round cultivation associated with irrigation justified their employment on an annual basis.

The system under which Madharis were permanently employed by Gounders for one year at a time was called the *pannaiyal* system. *Pannaiyals* were paid on a monthly basis, the wage amounting to an average of 30 litres of millets and Rs. 10 in cash per month in 1967. The *pannaiyal* was expected to work whenever the farmer needed him. His wife and children were also expected to work for the farmer whenever needed, children most often herding cattle.

In order to make sure the worker did not leave his employment, advances and loans with a moderate rate of interest were common. Often the loan had not been paid at the end of the year which meant that the *pannaiyal* had to continue with a new contract for another year (cf. Cederlöf 1997).

The fact that the Madharis had very low social status was the consequence of their weak economic position, their occupational activities, and their status as “immigrants”. They were regarded as unclean by other castes and treated as untouchables. They were residentially segregated from the rest of the community and had to live in special colonies, called *cheri*, outside the main

village. Segregation extended into many other fields and still remained strong in 1967: the Madharis were not allowed to draw water from the common village well, they were not allowed to enter the houses or courtyards of other castes, they had to pay submissive respect to other villagers whenever they met them, and they were ordered to perform all lowly tasks. The exploitation, discrimination and oppression had seemingly no limits.

### **From Pannaiyal to day coolies**

During our interaction with the Madharis in 1967 we were shocked to learn about their miserable living conditions: lack of food, clothing, housing, drinking water, sanitation and all else necessary for a decent standard of living.

The Madharis were a tragic sight, men, women, children and the old, thin bodied and all clad in tatters.

After the 1930s, agriculture was increasingly mechanised. Electric pumpsets started to replace leather buckets and bullocks in drawing water for irrigation and the tanning process had become industrialised too (cf. Cederlöf 1997). In the 1960s the Madharis had become victims of a rationalisation process, of which they were fully aware but about which they were unable to do anything. This theme was repeated in a number of interviews with Madharis.

With the words of a group of Madharis

This month we do not have enough to eat. There is no work for us. The harvest season is over. Can you give us some help? Now the Gounders are using the threshing machine and electric pumpsets. So we get less work and less income. They pay us only Rs. 2 per day. Sometimes there is no work for all of us. Formerly it was better but now there is surplus of labourers in this area.

And

For the last two years the threshing machine has been used by the Gounders so there is no work for us at harvest. Now there is electricity. Formerly we used to prepare the leather buckets for drawing water from the wells. Now we go for daily coolie work for the Gounders. But not every day. Today there is no work at all.

With no land of their own to cultivate, the Madharis had become casual agricultural labourers.<sup>20</sup> The casual work included ploughing, sowing, weeding, irrigation and harvesting. The daily wage was about Rs. 2.50 for male workers and Rs. 1.25 for female workers (1967). Almost all wages were paid in cash. For this they often had to work for more than ten hours a day.

In 1967 fewer Madharis than earlier were permanently employed farm labourers, i.e., pannaiyals, with a fixed monthly wage in cash and kind. In the rural area South of Palladam, about 25 per cent were pannaiyals, while in the urban fringe area there were fewer thus employed. In the latter area, however, one third of the Madharis had annual employment as workers in the urban-industrial economy of Tirupur.

Interestingly, in 1981/82 the institution of pannaiyal was somewhat more resilient (33 per cent) in villages northwest of Palladam studied by Heyer (2010). The difference may be explained by factors such as variations in the size of irrigated landholdings, cropping patterns, and the distance from urban areas. The further from the industrial conglomerate of Tirupur the more common, it appears, were permanently employed agricultural labourers at that time.

While in 1967 most of the Madharis in the vicinity of Palladam were formally free wage labourers, they were in practice very often tied to the place where they lived. More than 80 per cent of them were heavily indebted either to friends or to moneylenders who were often their employers, with loans of Rs. 100 or more. About half of all loans had an interest rate amounting to 12 % or more per month! The interest on employer loans was often paid back through work without wages or at lower wages rates. Madharis were seldom able to repay the original debt and so they got stuck in the place, bound for ever to insecure employment and income opportunities provided by the farmer-moneylenders.

In 1981/2 Heyer (2010) observed that the Madharis suffered from low wages. In theory they could leave the employment and the village, “absconding” as it was locally called, and leave the debt behind. But they seldom did, as they were

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<sup>20</sup> Cederlöf (1997:89-161) has traced this history in detail. While the new technologies arrived to the District in the 1930s, prompted by the state starting to install electricity in the villages, it was only during the severe and prolonged drought during 1947 – 1953, that the technology became widespread and was beginning to make a strong impact on farming practices. With boreholes and mechanical pumps water could be lifted from much deeper wells. With the lack of work during the drought, most farmers simply cancelled most pannaiyal contracts and went over to only employing day coolies.

hindered by the Madhari elders and risking even more insecure employment income opportunities elsewhere (Heyer 2010).

While the Madhari labourers and the Gounder farmers, male and female, mixed freely and worked side by side in the fields, the segregation of and discrimination against Madharis persisted in all other respects. Madharis used to say mockingly that it was strange to see how the Gounders refused to touch Madhari food or water, but at the same time could eat the food that they, the Madharis, had handled from seed to crop in the fields.

Gounders treated Madharis with contempt in 1967. Let me quote a Gounder in a village near Tirupur, where the Madharis had started to work as coolies in the town itself:

The Madharis come irregularly for work and you cannot trust them. I am very much concerned about my village fellows. Nowadays they drink and gamble. Very few are honest and hard-working. It is especially so with the Madharis. They are dirty and unclean. If they were clean I could think of eating with them. They do not come regularly for work. As soon as they have money, they spend it on liquor and so on. Then the women and the children have to suffer. Once I built a house for a Madhari and gave him permanent employment and good pay. Then he used to come regularly for work, but now he is not coming. The Madharis are ignorant and do not want to send their children to school. Instead they let the children work for them in the fields.

Brenda Beck, doing fieldwork in the region in the late sixties (1972) paints a very similar picture of the social and economic situation of the Madharis in those days. Her fieldwork also records the almost total submission of the Madharis to their Gounder masters. No organisations except religious ones had come near the Madharis and reduced the cause of their suffering. It was a situation of total servitude, it appears. Beck writes, comparing Paraiyars and Madharis: 'Both groups are ambivalent about their low status, of course, but in the case of the Matari, I have the impression that their low position is more fully internalized, and that that members of this community are prone to a strong sense of self-inferiority' (1972:134).

In my fieldwork, it appeared that the conversion to Christianity had made some difference though (see below).

Isolated from the rest of the community and without their traditional employment and income security, the Madharis had retained many of their old Dravidian customs, which were most readily seen in their religion. They worshipped the so called village gods (*grama devatas*), e.g. Mariyamma – the mother goddess. Facing material sufferings like illness they, like most people, took to religious worship. Yet their general notion of “the other reality” seemed to be rather secular. ‘There is no God but for man who created him.’ Such expressions were fairly common. A yearly festival to the guardian goddess was celebrated in a manner similar to that practiced by the higher castes, but it seldom took place due to the increased poverty of the Madharis.

Gender relations were different among the Madharis than among other and especially higher castes. As I saw it, Madhari women were often bold and seemed to have greater influence in their caste group and in family affairs than women of other castes. The reason for this was probably that they often had to work as wage labourers in the fields and earn their own income. As a result, bride price was the persistent custom of the Madharis, which meant that the husband’s family had to give a gift to the bride’s family as compensation for the loss of a working hand. Also in marriage they were freer than other Hindu women. If they were unhappy about the marriage, e.g., if the husband was drinking and not contributing to the expenses for food, etc., they would sometimes leave him, return to their parents’ house and get remarried.

What we see here is a relative autonomy of gender relations among the Madharis in relation to the severe exploitation, oppression and discrimination that they all faced at the hand of the Gounders.

In the fieldwork in 1967 we were all young men and interviewed mostly men and were not very qualified to delve into women’s situation. Thus our observations carry limited weight in this regard. However, the relative “freedom” of Madhari women, that we observed, seems to have persisted into contemporary time. Nitya Rao (2014) conducted focussed life-story interviews with 20 Dalit couples, most of them Madharis, in a village in Tirupur district.<sup>21</sup> She found a limited but real space for women’s agency to negotiate both choice of husband and everyday interaction in married life. Many marriages were self-arranged, that is, by active choice on the part of the women. She found that alcoholism and violence against women were common reasons for stress and

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<sup>21</sup> The husbands and wives were interviewed separately ‘by four researchers, two male and two female’ (Rao 2014:9).

oppression but also for negotiations, including in the end divorce or at worst suicide. The space for women to act depended among other things on their social networks of peers and kin.

### *From Hindu to Christian*

In the old society there was a fixed role and status for the Madharis, even though low and detested. In their own understanding, in the 1960s they faced increased poverty and this led to a general disintegration of the networks of social relations in the local community. It was against this background that we can understand how Madharis came to convert to Christianity. It was a kind of “rebellion”.

The Church of Sweden Mission and from 1919, the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church (TELC), had been working in this area since 1900.<sup>22</sup> The conversion of the Madharis began in the 1930s but it was during the severe drought from 1947 to 1953, from which the Madharis were the first to suffer, that conversion gained momentum. The Tamil Church was able to help with food and material gifts. In some cases the church even saved people from death from starvation. The centre of these activities was a mission station called Arulpuram,<sup>23</sup> on the road between Tirupur and Palladam.

We were the first Madharis in this area to become Christians. We requested the Swedish missionary in Arulpuram and gave Rs. 300 to the church for our conversion. This was in 1951 or 1952. We were very happy to be converted to Christianity because at that time the Gounders were very hostile and sometimes used to beat us. To avoid this and to have somebody to come and help us we readily accepted the new faith. But nowadays the Church is not taking care of us as it used to do. Formerly it used to give wheat flour or beans or milk powder.

The conversion to Christianity also meant that the Madharis got some, though limited, protection against discrimination by the other castes.

Group interview in 1967:

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<sup>22</sup> The Church was the result of German and Swedish missionary work starting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> Arulpuram later built a tannery and employed poor Christian Madharis in nearby villages. They stitched chappals (sandals) for sale abroad.

- What is the difference between Hindus and Christians?
- If we are Christians there is one durai (pastor or missionary) and if the Gounders beat us we are protected. When we are in need of food grains they will sometimes bring us one or two bags and supply to all of us. For some important festivals, like Christmas, durai will supply bengal gram and fried rice. The missionary who converted us talked our language and took photos. Those who are Christians, for them there is material help and protection.

The need for drinking water was another direct reason for conversion. The Tamil Church started a well drilling programme during the severe drought in the 1950s. The programme was still in operation in 1967, another period of severe drought. The following exchange confirms this:

- Are you happy as Christians?
- Yes, we are.
- Why did you become Christians?
- We had water problems. To solve those problems we became Christians and for nothing else.
- Did you get water after becoming Christians?
- Yes, they constructed a bore well and the water problem was solved, but after some time the pump was broken and for six months it was not taken care of, and then finally they (the Church) took it back. Now there is an open well dug for us by the government, but the water is salty.

The interviewer then came back to the difference between Hindus and Christians:

- What is the difference between a Christian and a Hindu?
- There is no difference.
- Do you think that Hindus also are happy?
- Yes, they are happy and we are also happy. There is no grievance for being Christian.
- When did you become Christians and who converted you?
- An old natyar (pastor). We do not know his name but he was a very good man. At the time of our conversion many white people came here. We welcomed them all by beating the drums and presented garlands to them all. Before we became Christians we asked the Gounders and they permitted us. They also came here when we were converted.
- Are you going to church regularly?

- Yes we are. During Christmas celebrations the missiammal used to bring sweets and even saris to some women like the widows here and also to the woman who kept the church clean. Dhankannu bible amma was here for more than 8 years and she was a very nice bible amma.

Earlier the Gounders had often objected to the conversion, fearing that they would lose control of the Madharis. There is one story in the studied villages about how the Madharis converted to Christianity in the late forties and how the Church built a school in the colony. The school was burnt down one night and the Madharis, fearing that it was the work of the Gounders, reconverted to Hinduism. Beck (1972:138) notes this process based on missionary sources. Cederlöf suggests that the resistance from the Gounders abated when they no longer needed the permanent work of the Madharis, and they were perhaps happy to be “free” of the responsibility for them (cf. Cederlöf 1997).

The Church also tried to help the Madharis to educate some of their children by sending them to boarding schools run by the Church. Generally Madharis were unable to send their children to the village school.

- Do you send your children to the village school?
- No, we don't. When a boy is able to follow some sheep, then we send him out to graze sheep. If we send him to school we do not even get that little amount of money.
- But if the government would pay you Rs. 50 per year for each child you sent to school. What would you think of that?
- Rs. 50 will not be enough. If we send a boy to the Gounder's field we will get Rs. 100 as an advance. For this the boy has to feed the Gounder's sheep for the whole year.

Many of the Madhari girls could not go to school either, because they had to take care of their younger sisters and brothers when the parents were away from the house working in the fields. Thus, poverty and the need for child labour accounted at least partly for the poor enrolment of Madhari children in the schools.

Another strong reason for not going to school was of course the persistent discrimination against the Madharis. They were not welcome into the streets and houses of the main hamlet, where the school was most often situated. The Mission had little to offer against this. Only a very small number of Madhari children were enrolled at their boarding schools.

There is no doubt that the Madharis converted to Christianity for material rather than “spiritual” reasons. I found in my interviews that the converts had very little knowledge about the Christian faith and they rather seldom participated in religious services (going through the congregation files). But this situation was not only because of their lack of interest. One important reason for their lack of engagement was the organisation of the Church of which they had become members.

First of all, conversion was normally a collective act, in which the whole or majority of the members of the local caste group or lineage became Christians. Unable to maintain a network among scattered believers, the Church chose to implement mass conversions in the villages where they found an opportunity.

The Church was at the same time a typical Lutheran priest church with a heavy emphasis of baptism, confirmation and regular church-going. The inclusion of a large number of rural labourers spread out over large areas led to severe strains on the organisation. The Church did not have enough pastors and other church workers to carry out the work. In charge of congregations in ten to fifteen hamlets, the pastor was normally able to visit each congregation on average only about three times a year. In the meantime congregational care was the responsibility of evangelists and bible women. There were, however, also too few of these to be able to provide the necessary services. Many Madharis had to wait for long periods before being baptised. In 1967, the majority of them were not yet confirmed and those confirmed only attended communion services irregularly because of the infrequent visits of the pastor, who was the only one with clerical rights to provide such services.

But the Church was also, and that is perhaps more important, a caste- and class-based church, divided into two groups. One was the dominant minority of middle class Christians in the towns, who were wealthy and who occupied all the important offices in the church. The other group consisted of rural labourers, like the Madharis, who were unable to make their voice heard in the Church. They had been converted, often by means of resources from missionary societies abroad, resources that had short durability and could not suffice even in the short run, not to speak of the long run, to ameliorate their poor socio-economic situation.

This gulf between urban and rural areas and distinction between castes was also reinforced by reactions in the villages to the conversion of the Madharis by the

Lutheran Church. In several of the villages the Adi Dravidas had earlier been converted by the same church.<sup>24</sup> Once the latter learned about the new converts from the Madhari caste, they quit the Lutheran Church and joined the Roman Catholic Church instead. The instability of the rural congregations was later seen when an American Free Church pastor started to travel around and enlist the Madharis for his new church, offering better “terms of transfer and maintenance”.

An unrealistic approach had been adopted by the Church to overcome this situation. In 1960 a so called Village Industry programme was started. Training and loans were given to individual Madhari Christians to enable them to practice their traditional vocation, viz., tanning, but also for the purchase of animals, instruments for mat weaving, and material for house construction. Some Rs. 6000 was spent for these purposes in the study villages from the beginning of the sixties up to 1967. The loans for tanning amounted to an average of between Rs. 200 to 500. There was also training in tanning, but the craft was not competitive with such a low investment given the newly built tanning industries run by Muslim traders. It turned out to be an artificial revival of the old tanning activities. In 1967 the lasting result of the Village Industry programme seemed to be the houses built. Unfortunately, the poor status of the Madhari households made it very difficult for them to maintain their houses, so even these houses had deteriorated rapidly.

The Missionaries interpreted the pannaiyal institution as very oppressive, based as it was on debt and bondage. They therefore sought to raise funds for the repaying of the debts, “freeing”, as they saw it, Christian Madharis. Since, however, there was no other way that Madharis could find stable employment and a livelihood this would have resulted only in more misery. The intervention did not succeed. As many or slightly more Christian Madharis in the rural area were employed as pannaiyals in 1967 (29 %) as Hindu Madharis (23 %).

The change from Hinduism to Christianity had, thus, meant very little for the social and economic situation of the Madharis. Basically they had remained in the same predicament as before.

True, a few of their children had been educated in boarding schools, but that had only enhanced individual mobility, and had not led to any improvement of the

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<sup>24</sup> The Adi Dravida converted in greater numbers than the Madharis according to Andreen, 1955:4-5. Cf. Beck 1972:138 and Cederlöf 1997.

Madhari community as a whole. Educated Madharis seldom returned to their native places. Instead they sought employment in the towns where they could find jobs up to their education and where they could sometimes rid themselves of the marks of belonging to a debased caste. In this way the Madharis left in the villages lost their most able members, who might otherwise have served as leaders for local emancipation.

### *State development programmes*

Since independence the Indian government has made various efforts to promote social and economic development in rural areas. Two kinds of programmes were started early on. One was the Community Development programme, which aimed at the establishment of modern education and infrastructure in the villages. The other was the Harijan Welfare programme undertaken directly for the sake of the emancipation of the most depressed groups, the Harijans or the ex-untouchables.

Through the Community Development schemes schools and medical dispensaries spread to a large number of villages. Local democracy was encouraged through the establishment of Village Panchayats. Loans for economic development, especially farming, were provided through co-operatives societies. However the Madharis did not benefit much from these.

Take the provision of education, for example. In 13 out of the 15 villages in our study there were elementary schools, yet only 20 per cent of the Madhari school-age children went to school in 1967 and only 29 per cent of the Madhari households had any educated member at all. Those educated had normally attended school only for a few years, which meant that they either never learnt how to read and write, or had quickly forgotten how to do so after leaving school. One of the reasons for this ineffective process of learning was too apparent: the Madharis possessed no books or magazines, they had no electric light in their houses, their work did not require or stimulate reading, and they were just too tired to read after a long day of hard work.

Most hamlets in the study had access to a medical dispensary within a distance of a few miles, but only one third of the Madhari households had ever made a visit to these dispensaries. Christians had made somewhat more visits, often brought there by church workers when taken ill. The same initiative was seldom

taken by Community Development workers. When village workers of the community development programme approached Madharis it was rather to propagate family planning. The response of the Madharis to this was very negative. In a discussion some of them said:

- We do not like family planning. Perhaps in ten years' time we will adopt it. One agent has been here and tried to convince us. Some of the old people are said to have gone for an operation.
- But if you have three children is that not enough?
- Yes, three children is enough. But what if they die? We have no money to go to the hospital and get our children treated. Only if we have money they will treat us well in the hospital. And family planning is not good for a man. Some Gounders from this village have been operated and now they are not able to work in the cold season. They cannot even come out of their houses when it is cold.

The family planning programmes one-sidedly stressed sterilisation for which most of the villagers, the Madharis were no exception, had little use. Most households had three children or less (55 per cent of all households), the mean number of children was 3, and the mean size of households was 4.7 persons. In 57 per cent of all households one or more children had died.<sup>25</sup>

For a great many of the Madhari households, then, the problem was how to have more children, and how to keep the children alive, rather than preventing more children from being born. In families in which there were more children, there was a more positive attitude to family planning. Yet, almost everybody was scared of sterilisation and even used rationalisations like that about illness caused by sterilisation to strengthen their natural fears.

Finally, formal politics, both local and national, had so far left the Madharis largely outside the sphere of influence. As regards local democratic institutions, their participation was low. Only 42 per cent of the male heads had participated in any local election to the local Panchayat, which was still functioning in

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<sup>25</sup> A rough estimate is that about 300 per thousand of the children born live had died before reaching the age of five. In a further statistical analysis it would be possible to calculate the infant mortality rate, for which comparative figures are available. In Thaiyur village south of Chennai, where 90 per cent of the population belonged to a Scheduled Caste, the infant mortality rate in 1969/70 was 290 per thousand live births died before the age of one year (Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975, 1980: 47).

1967.<sup>26</sup> This is not surprising. The most the Madharis could hope for was to get one of their fellow caste members into a council of 12 members from various castes in the village.<sup>27</sup> The Panchayat was completely dominated by the higher castes. The Madhari member had to sit on the floor, while the others sat on chairs. He, – and it was never a ‘she’ - was not expected to say anything unless directly asked to do so.

More than 90 per cent of the Madhari household heads had participated in the 1967 General Elections. In those elections it was the interest of the higher castes, who dominated the local party machinery, to mobilise as many votes as possible. Thus, patrons (landlords) laid claim on their clients (agricultural labourers) to vote for them or their party. Often encouraged by a small remuneration, the Madharis felt obliged to vote for a party about which they had very little knowledge and a programme that took little interest in their problems. This lack of genuine political mobilisation meant that the Madharis were uninterested in politics, or as one of them expressed it:

- But what to do when you have promised to vote for two parties? Some of us voted for DMK and a few voted for the Communists. Anyway we don't know anything about politics and political parties. We are a depressed people, and who cares.

The direct aid to the Madharis through the Harijan Welfare Board had been of marginal importance with few exceptions: In one of the villages the Madharis had built new houses by means of loans from the Board. However, in this village they had become very shy and afraid of outsiders, because of their inability to repay the loans and maybe also fear of family planning workers. A more general criticism of the programme is that they suffered from insufficient funding and therefore looked like random charity. Other direct programmes suffered from lack of applicability. For example, credit for implements and cultivation were to be given to Harijans who had land. But very few Madharis had land.

### *Industrialisation*

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<sup>26</sup> After the mid-1970s the Panchayat system was more or less moribund in Tamil Nadu, only to be revived in 1996 with new laws and fresh elections.

<sup>27</sup> Being numerically in a minority position, the Madharis could at the most elect one or two members from their own wards.

Standard development theories stress that industrialisation is the means by which under- and unemployed rural people will be drawn into production and thereby share in the general increase in standards of living. In Tilly's analytical framework, growing industries open up the possibility for poor and landless rural workers to migrate to work in urban areas. By drawing on successful first migrants, other members of the same family, kinship or caste group can then network with them and get a job and a place to stay in the town. This is a primary example of what Tilly calls 'chain-migration', an opportunity hoarding mechanism for the non-elite (Tilly 1999:149).

The pace of industrialisation has generally been slow in India, but there are pockets, like for example Tirupur in 1967, where fairly rapid industrialisation had taken place and theories of development could be put to a test. More specifically, we can ask: How had the Madharis fared in the industrialisation process? By comparing the conditions of Madharis in the urban fringe villages with those of Madharis in the typical agrarian villages we may get an answer to this question.

Industrialisation had first of all meant some new employment opportunities for Madharis in the fringe villages near Tirupur, mostly as day labourers in transport. A small number of them had become permanently employed factory workers, commuting every day to and from the town. Higher income and security enabled these few to raise their standard of living and they had become high status members of their community. The vast majority of the urban entrants, however, were day labourers and continued to live in utter poverty. Fieldwork among urban Madharis in Tirupur revealed their meagre and precarious existence in sheds and mud huts along one of the major roads, with very insecure income. Only a few of their children went to school, most working as labourers like their parents.

The few successful Madharis could not provide *opportunity hoarding* for the vast majority of their fellow caste members. Another of the SC castes, the Adi Dravidas, had been more successful in this respect. Through early education through church schools and with networks forming among fellow caste members in the towns, they were able to secure stable and better paid jobs.

The new employment opportunities had also led to a relative scarcity of agricultural labourers in peak periods, which in turn had led to a marginal rise in the wages for agricultural coolie work. The Madharis therefore had somewhat

higher income in the urban fringe villages than in the typical agrarian villages. On the other hand, they were more indebted and owned less livestock in the fringe villages. So far, their overall economic conditions seemed not to have improved except in the few cases where they had become factory workers.

No improvement in Madharis' educational standards could be found. Madhari children attended school in the fringe villages as little as elsewhere. A slight improvement was found in the use of medical institutions, but their general health status, measured for example by the child mortality rate, was very similar to that in the agrarian villages and shockingly poor.

What differed, and what perhaps contained some hope for the future, was the attitudes of some of the Madharis in the fringe villages towards their own situation. They were more discontent and grumbling about their situation, which was seen, for example, in their higher participation in both national and local elections.

As in the case of the Christian Madharis, the urban fringe Hindu Madharis were also more positive in their attitudes towards education, occupational mobility, inter-caste relations, etc. compared to their rural fellow caste members. But those attitudes were not very instrumental in their circumstances. Madharis might be interested in the education of their children, but they could not afford to send their children to school even if they were invited to do so free of costs, and even if midday meals were served in the schools. The children simply had to work for the survival of the family.

All in all, the situation of the Madharis in the urban fringe villages was much the same as that prevailing in the agrarian villages. Neither industrialisation nor development programmes nor Christianity had been able to alter their condition.

### **Down and out and then what?**

49 years have passed since I along with five fellow students conducted fieldwork among the Madharis in the Palladam area. It is where my interest in Indian social development started.

This is now two generations ago and most things in rural India have changed, changes which actually started in a broad way with the state driven Green Revolution, and which intensified and raised income among the rural poor so

that they could better feed and clothe themselves, build better houses and so on. Along with this there has been a formidable transformation into an urban industrial and service economy with agriculture today contributing less than 15 per cent to national income.

Most rural people now get their main income from non-farm employment. They still live in villages but work in small industries, services of various kinds, or commute to work in towns just like some of the Madharis above in the urban fringe villages. More recently, they have started to migrate and settle in urban areas in large numbers.

Today most rural people send their children to school, enjoy simple but time-saving household machines and watch TV at nights. As we know, it is not exactly a smooth and pleasant journey, on the contrary most people are heavily exploited in the new capitalist economy and still lack good life opportunities and a green and healthy environment. Many still lack bare necessities (cf. Lindberg 2012).

What then of the Madharis - the poorest of all in 1967? How have they fared in this transformation?

### *A historical perspective*

Gunnel Cederlöf from Uppsala has written a doctoral dissertation about the social and economic situation of the Madharis over a period of 70 years, from 1900 to 1970 (Cederlöf 1997). She used my undergraduate dissertation and other texts that I wrote at the beginning of the 1970s including my own diaries and archive from the fieldwork.

The thesis is called *Bonds Lost, Subordination, Conflict and Mobilisation in Rural South India c. 1900 – 1970*. It is a very telling title. Cederlöf's careful historical analysis largely confirms the fact that my study took place at what was most probably the worst ever situation of the Madharis as a community. From a subordinate but secure position as bonded labourers and leather workers with a guaranteed minimum of life necessities, they were more or less thrown on the garbage heap when modernisation and mechanisation came into agriculture. The coming of the pump sets, tractors, threshing and other machines from the 1960s onward had shattered their lives completely, like a storm over the calm seas.

There is an old English proverb ‘The Devil takes the hindmost’. For the displaced Madharis there was no escape in sight. When I met them in 1967 the majority were either desperate or resigned over their helplessness. Nobody could really help them, as I have shown above. Some of them had tried to convert to Christianity but that was of no avail to them. When the Christian missionaries, in their ignorance, had sought to liberate tied farm servants from their debts by giving them new loans, they simply “rescued” them into the insecurity of day labourer work, growing scarcer by the day.

In 1967, industrial and town employment was still a distant dream of most of the Madharis. Their community was tight and locally bound with neither wider social networks nor economic resources to go and find their permanent and better paid employment in towns. One can hardly imagine the kind of destitution and misery that they must have lived through since then.

### **Back from hell**

“Wonder” is perhaps a too strong word for what has happened to the Madhari community since that time but, thanks to meticulous contemporary research, we now know that they have fared much better than even the most optimistic of pessimists in the 1960s could have imagined (Heyer 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014; Carswell 2012; Carswell and de Neve 2013 and 2014).

Who could imagine what Heyer (2012) tells us were two children, well fed and clad and going to school? Who could imagine housewives in quite a few of the Madhari households who spend their time cooking, cleaning and looking after their children’s education (Heyer 2014)? Who could imagine old women and men stopping work in their sixties enjoying a small state pension? Who could imagine pucca houses, electric lights and TV? (Heyer 2010, 2014) The list of real improvements could go on.

I had a vague anticipation of this already in 1977 when I visited some of the villages from 1967. I sat among Madharis who were working as labourers in Tirupur, transporting cotton and cloth on their hand-drawn carts. They had just been organised by the CITU, the CPM-trade union and were proudly telling me about the sense of dignity it had given them.

Many Madharis, however, have stayed back in their villages and continued to work as agricultural labourers. The more important change has been the

movement out of the village economy of workers from other castes, which has meant that Madharis got more employment and could bargain for higher wages in agriculture. Eventually they have formed gangs, called *kothus*, who labour-migrate in wider circles bargaining for the job they are being contracted for.

If we apply Tilly's concept of *opportunity hoarding*, we could perhaps say that the backward and isolated situation of the Madharis earlier, closely attached as they were to the Gounder farmers, meant that many of them could not get better paid jobs in town, but were now suddenly landed in a niche of better paid work opportunities in agriculture, a kind of "reversed opportunity hoarding". One could also see the Madharis as being '*socially immobile*' using Mukherji's analysis of social mobility (2012:46) until a new and better opportunity emerged within the context of simultaneous agricultural development and exit of other working castes in their villages.

Thus, the almost phenomenal success of the so called knitwear revolution in and around Tirupur city, with its ever growing demand for wage labour, has tightened the labour markets also in agriculture. Agriculture, though beset with water scarcity, still thrives at a high level of mechanisation and increasing cultivation of high-value crops like turmeric, banana and sugarcane. Drip-irrigation has been introduced.

Along with this, state social policy has made important inroads into village life, reaching also the poor. The Public Distribution System with outlets in villages supplies a majority with subsidised rice and other basic amenities. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme gives employment especially to landless women also pushing up their wages in other work. Electricity is supplied to most households and house plots and new houses are provided to many Dalit families. Schools enrol practically all children at primary level with free midday meals, free textbooks and free travel for those going to middle and higher schools in other villages. The public health system has a better reach in the villages, especially when it comes to vaccination and child and maternity care. There are legal provisions for old age and widowers' pensions and health care even if funds are lacking and the bureaucratic process of getting them are cumbersome. (Heyer 2012).

The Tirupur region may be an extreme example of progressive social changes taking place under the joint impact of industrial, agricultural and social developments, but these findings are consistent with those of other studies of

social transformation in rural Tamil Nadu in recent times (Athreya et al 1990; Djurfeldt et al 2008; Lindberg et al 2014; and Harris et al 2010).

### *Downsides*

The social policy intervention finally reaching the villages is perhaps somewhat paradoxical in an era of increasing and highly exploitative Indian capitalism, with ever old and new ways of exploiting, discriminating and oppressing workers. But social policy interventions could be seen as a necessary way of ensuring the survival of the labouring classes and placating them.

The downsides of all this are not difficult to see. With mechanisation agriculture has become less labour-intensive and women get less workdays in agriculture than earlier. Uneducated Madhari women, constrained by patriarchy, are less equipped to get jobs in the non-farm sector than their menfolk. Home- and child-care makes it almost impossible to commute for any distance daily.<sup>28</sup> With increasing male wages, however, this has made it an option for the women to stay home at least during pregnancy, childbirth and care of small children. As many as one third of all Madhari women in Heyer's 2008/09 survey stayed home as housewives, many of them also for prolonged periods caring for their children going to school as well. Avoiding the drudgery of hard and ill paid agricultural work, they considered themselves better placed and autonomous than before (Heyer 2014). The downside of this was the strengthening of middle class values and of patriarchy in their own homes (Rao 2014).

New forms of exploitation emerge alongside free wage labour in the urban economy. In some of the villages in the Tirupur area a small scale power-loom industry has grown up. In these most of the workforce is Dalit including Madharis. In order to control them and prevent them from seeking jobs in the garment industry, workers are tied by huge advances from the employers, amounting to more than a year's wage, and unable to repay the debt and leave the job (Carswell and De Neve 2013 and 2014). Thus, modelled on the old pannaiyal system, no longer there in the farms, a new form of "bonded labour"

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<sup>28</sup> Those women who now migrate to garment work in Tirupur are educated and unmarried.

has emerged. Emulation and adaptation of old and new forms of exploitation thus exist side by side.<sup>29</sup>

Environmentally speaking, the Tirupur region suffers from one of the worst polluted environments in India. This is not to say the least. Besides the chemicals and poisonous pesticides used in agriculture, as everywhere else, the textile industry more or less destroys the groundwater and soils in the area by not being forced effectively to purify the poisonous wastes produced.

### **Marked for ever?**

The workings of Indian capitalism and its intersection with the persisting caste-untouchability syndrome is such that, even if real wages have improved and standards of living have taken a remarkable step upwards, the Madharis still occupy the lowest ladder in the hierarchy, well aware of their underdog position. Even the pride of the workers union is now shattered with the disappearing of CPM mobilisation. The more recent CPM promotion of the Untouchability Eradication Front cannot fully replace a workers' trade union in terms of caste eradication and social integration.

The feelings of relative deprivation are not particularly eased by viewing the rest of society via colour television! Now that they are touched by the outside world, they are still “untouchable” and unable to climb the ladders. Their structural position in the system remains as before – on the bottom - and they know this. For example, no matter how their young would like to arrange their own marriages, these structures still force them into endogamy, stuck with their lot. Every attempt at cross-caste marriage on the part of the Madharis, especially between Gounder girls and Madhari boys, is repressed by other castes, sometimes even with murders.

A glimmer of hope is attached to those educated young, often unmarried, Madharis who have shed work in agriculture and are now trying their luck in garment and other industries. Commuting for industrial jobs, some of those with more stable employment, now convey a message of liberation from the

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<sup>29</sup> Debt tied labour is common all over India today, for example among migrant workers (see Breman 2003, Pattenden 2014, and Guérin at al 2015).

remaining stigma and debasing treatment of Dalits in villages.<sup>30</sup> ‘Stadtluft macht frei’ as the German proverb goes. It remains to be seen if this goes for Dalits in Indian cities in a generation or two.

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<sup>30</sup> A similar experience is related by Jayaseelan (2014) interviewing retrenched tea plantation workers who were forced to return to their original villages on the plains. There they found discrimination of Dalits still in full force and far harsher compared to the situation in the hills.

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