

## **OCCUPATIONAL SHIFTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN TAMIL NADU A STUDY ON A SILENT AGRARIAN REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Among the organisations that work for the rights and welfare of the dalits in India, there is a strong difference of opinion about 'what has a market-based economy to offer to the dalits?' The point of contention is that market is most often imperfect with a race amongst the unequals where the fittest comes out as winner. Being the poorest of the poor segment in the Indian society, dalits are sure to get hurt, especially, if they are thrown out of agriculture, which they depend on as wage earners for years. However, empirical verification made in 24 villages in Tamil Nadu State reveals that there is a perceptible positive change taking place in favour of dalits. The traditional landed class are shifting to other sectors of the economy – outside agriculture. This has made way for the dalits to fill in the vacuum created by the traditional landed class, and emerge as 'the neo-landed' class. This is wiping out the 'landlessness' character of the dalits.*

### **Introduction**

Dalit<sup>1</sup> refers to a group of communities in India, members of which traditionally have been socially backward, economically poor and politically weak. A close English word can be 'the oppressed'. The contention of many of the dalits' organisations at the start of the globalisation policies in India in 1990s was that a market-based economy would hurt the poor, and the worst affected sector would be

agriculture, and the worst affected section of the population would be dalits most of whom are dependent on wage employment in agriculture (Jogdand P G et al 2008). It is more than two decades now since India started implementing market-based economic policies and the related reform measures. In reality, India after it shifted gear to become a market-based economy has hurt the dalit or benefited them is a vital question for empirical investigation.

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Even among the organisations that work for the welfare or rights of the dalits, there is strong difference of opinion and they stand divided in responding to a question like this (Gail Omvedt 2000). Some strongly argue (Jagdish Bhagwati 2004; Raja J C 2009; Meenakshisundaram S S 2009) that markets especially because of the increased mobility and connectedness, has plenty to offer everyone including the dalits. There are others who argue that marketplace is a race amongst the unequals which results in survival of the fittest. It has a tendency to hurt the poorer countries and the poor (Janakarajan S 2009). Hence, it surely affects the dalits (Anad Teltumbde 2001; Fernandes O 2009). These are oft-repeated arguments put forth by dalit organisations. For empirical purposes market-based economy is operationalised as opening up of knowledge-based social connectedness resulting in economic benefits.

Theoretically speaking, market principles show reckless disregard to sentiments. That a section of the population in a given country have been historically marginalised and if they need be given a helping hand is absolutely out of the question. The Structured Inequality Axiom of the Conflict Metatheory (Powers H Charles 2010) sociologically substantiates this idea that the social structural arrangements that survive tend to be those that protect the interests of more-powerful people at the expense of less-powerful. A logical argument that follows is that a market-based economy focuses primarily on knowledge-based social connectedness resulting in economic benefits for those with knowledge, information, technology or capital to invest. Dalits living on

the margins of the society shall get disconnected not being able to make way into any of these. This paper comes out of an empirical study that went into verifying the validity of these statements in 24 dalit villages covering six districts of Tamil Nadu viz. Thiruvavur, Cuddalore, Villupuram, Salem, Ramanathapuram and Vellore where dalits reside in large numbers.

### Research Methods Used

This is primarily a qualitative study (corroborated by secondary data from the Agricultural Census of Government of India at the annexure). The main findings of the study emerge from a series of case studies (multiple case study method) conducted at twenty four dalit villages in six districts in Tamil Nadu State. Diverse corpus of verbal data were collected from across districts from dalits living in two different contexts – wet regions and relatively dry regions. The study used tools drawn from qualitative research methods such as focus group discussions, chain of interviews, trend change, direct observations, and on-the-spot analysis. Matrix scoring was used to approximately quantify the number of people with various modern facilities such as mobile phones, computer skills, use of internet, etc. The verbal data collected were triangulated with other groups to find out the congruence, saturation points and the patterns that emerge. The patterns led to categories for theme-generation and theory-generation.

Aggregation of data and similarities and dissimilarities were analysed on the spot and the background and reasons probed. Besides dalits, non-dalits living in dalit villages were also interviewed to get their view of the

developments taking place in the lives of dalits. This study speaks of dalits in general including all SC/STs, and does not go into distinguishing Dalit Christians and Dalits Muslims, etc. The commonalities that emerged in all the study villages have been captured as the main thread, though there are also oddities reported specifying the contexts.

The strength of this paper lies in the intensive field work carried out; and secondly,

when the results of the study were compared against the secondary data obtained from the Agricultural Census 2000-01 and 2010-11, they were found to be very much in congruence. We maintain that this is a qualitative study, and for those who would like to take an instantaneous look at the relevant secondary data, we present them in the form of a line-graph at the annexure.

#### **Box – 1: A Brief Background Note of Dalits in Tamil Nadu**

The total population of Tamil Nadu as per the 2011 Census was 72.14 million. Majority of the dalits come from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). There are 14.71 million Scheduled Castes; and 0.57 million Scheduled Tribes in the State. Census of India 2011 reports that there are 76 Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu. Five out of the 76 community divisions within SCs constitute 93.5 per cent of the SCs. They are Adi Dravida (45.6 per cent), Pallan (19.2 per cent), Paraiyan (15.7 per cent), Chakkiliyan (6.6 per cent) and Arunthathiyar (6.5 per cent). Interestingly, 35 community groups within SCs reported population of less than one thousand population. Among the districts, Thiruvarur has the highest proportion of SC population to its total population, and the Nilgiris has the highest ST population in the State, followed by Salem and Nammakkal. Dalits, account for almost 20 per cent of the rural population in Tamil Nadu (Census of India 2011). One expression that covers both SC and ST is 'dalits', which this study also uses, for the sake of familiarity this word has gained over a period of time. It is, now, included in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th Edition), too.

#### **Occupational Shifts**

***Dalits and Livelihoods*** : Historically, the dalits have undergone various forms of deprivation (Gail Omvedt 2006) such as non-possession of land or any physical capital; deprivation of financial capital to take up entrepreneurial ventures; deprivation of human capability with only unskilled manual labour to eke out a living;

and absence of strong social capital to participate in governance or to decide the development direction (Rakesh et al 2007; Veena Das 2008). However, there are opportunities that corporate globalisation has brought for talents, and not confined to the non-dalits alone. They are not based on rural social hierarchy or traditional discrimination (Ramaiah A 2004).

**Traditional Livelihoods of Dalits :** The activities and functions of dalits in traditional Indian society were very much limited and were directly pertaining to land, rearing cows and buffaloes, and rudimentary human services such as making footwears, carrying verbal circulars (messages) of death in the families of upper castes, burning dead humans, beating drums in death houses, burying dead animals, manual scavenging of night soil and so on. The 'economic functioning' of dalit community in order to eke out a living largely determined the social status of dalits (Veena Das 2008). The Scheduled Caste (SC) people were mainly farm labourers, attached to families of landlords. They were the working majority involved in the production of essential commodities for the entire community. It was a social arrangement and moreover, the dalits were mentally conditioned to lead a life of that sort. We must add here that equally true was the statement that not many opportunities existed outside agriculture to give thought about alternative livelihoods. The social and economic functioning of dalits usually operated through capabilities and activities handed down from generation to generation. Similarly, the tribals, known as the STs (Scheduled Tribes) in India were supposed to lead a life by hunting and gathering. This is historically so, because they reside in the vicinity of forests.

**Diversification of Livelihoods:** It is one of the inherent characteristics of market that it can expand / diversify occupational choices. Market has accelerated the mobility of humans and products, and has enhanced social connectivity. The reach of Nokia and Vodafone; or Pepsi and Coke even in the remotest of

Indian villages is amazing. In Indian villages they seem to do better rural extension in triggering a change in 'the concept of self' and 'life-style' in the mindset of an ordinary rural person. Improved transport and telecommunication facilities have greatly enabled mobility of younger generation of the dalits. The contacts that some of them could establish help many of them to take up diversified livelihood options. Their mobility has helped establish new contacts. The facility to become mobile and be in touch through telecommunication facilities - be it a mobile phone or coin operated Public Telephone - has enabled the youth to move away from their villages and work in varied fields. This can be explained through the following observations.

Bands of youth from Tamil Nadu dalit villages (Villupuram, Cuddalore, Ramanathapuram districts) work as construction workers, rod benders and manual labourers in laying telephone cables in cities like Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru. Ten to twenty such youth could be identified in each of the study village in Cuddalore, and Villupuram. Similar statements could be recorded from other districts like Thiruvapur, that the dalit youth are employed in garment industries in Thirupur, Erode and Coimbatore. There are dalit youth - reported by their parents in the study villages - employed in bus body building industries of Karur. They are also employed as casual labourers in the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) complex in Cuddalore. Local body Presidents from Thiruvannamalai have fought with the Multi-National Companies (MNCs) of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Cheyyar near Chennai that has over 650 youth,

mostly women from dalit villages getting employment at Cheyyar SEZ in Thiruvannamalai district (Murthy, 2008). There are over 3000 young men and women including 800 dalits from around Kancheepuram and Sriperumbudur (near Chennai) working in Nokia Electronics, Nixon, and at Nike athletic shoes manufacturing company run by a Taiwanese MNC.

Dalit youth, not less than 15 - 20 from each of the study villages in Ramanathapuram district have been recruited as masons, rode benders, centring builders, and helpers to work for construction companies in Dubai and in the Middle East. They have been recruited through a private recruitment agency in Paramakudi, Ramanathapuram district. These can be rolled out as a quick list of multiplicity of opportunities (or occupational choices) that have been found in the recent times, apart from the wage employment in agriculture – the only thing they had access to about 10 – 15 years ago. Incidentally, access to information about the diversified opportunities, coupled with social connectivity that the markets opened up made way for dalit youth in considerable number to find multiple occupations. Occupational freedom or freedom to choose from multiple livelihood opportunities is real development in the view of Sen, A (2000).

**Emergence of a Neo-Landed Class:** It was in 1990s that market-based policy processes in India set manufacturing and service sectors on the fast track of development - at a time when traditional agricultural families (caste-Hindus) found agriculture after mechanisation non-remunerative. This has led many caste-Hindus who until a few years ago viewed possession

of land as an important indicator of social status, to lay hand in sectors outside agriculture. Consequently, the current generation of the so called landed class have been left with very few to doing agriculture. They had to loosen their grip over agriculture. Nonetheless, their long-time inclination towards land did not allow them to give up agriculture altogether. Widely, they have started 'leasing out' lands to the dalits who earlier used to work as labourers in their farms. Similarly, when the traditional land owners leave the village they leave it to some trustworthy dalits to plough their land on share cropping arrangement. A dalit who was hitherto a wage earner thus gets down to doing his own cultivation in the status of share-cropper. This is a perceptible shift taking place across villages in the study districts<sup>2</sup>.

For the erstwhile landed class, the fashion of knowledge-based employment, salaried job for the son in the town, or a business in the town with other material possessions such as car, cash at bank and ATM card in his pocket started becoming the new indicators of social status. They find life outside agriculture brighter and have eventually started selling off lands to dalits, who for quite a few years had leased in lands from them. Some dalit organisations (e.g. Land for Tillers Movement [LAFTI] in Thiruvarur, Tamil Nadu) have worked in assisting dalits to buy such lands with bank loan through land purchase scheme for the SC/ST of the Government of Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation (TAHDCO) or Self-Help Group (SHG) loan. In Thiruvarur and Nagappattinam districts alone, over 40,000 acres have been transferred from caste-Hindus

to dalits in the last two decades (LAFTI 2010). This is witnessed in the dalit villages of Cuddalore and Ramanathapuram districts as well. Thus, a visible process of redistribution of land is taking place where the dalits are becoming the new landed class, and the erstwhile land owners are moving to other sectors of the economy.

In the words of Powers H Charles, (2010: 229), something that started as a rational choice for the landed class has resulted in a power imbalance axiom where the social setting changed over time in the direction of greater symmetry of power and dependence and to develop formal and informal limits on exploitation to the extent that non-symmetrical relationships defy balance.

Dalits from being agricultural wage earners are becoming either sharecroppers or new land owners – though with smallholdings size-wise. Other factors that work in favour of the shift is, the large pieces of land that were in the possession of erstwhile landed classes was non-remunerative putting machinery into agriculture, and hiring labour that has become expensive. Introduction of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) intensified the demand for agriculture labourers and pushed the cost of labour in agriculture up, including of women's (GoI 2009; UNDP 2010). An important finding of several earlier studies on agriculture in India that 'agriculture is overcrowded and underpaid' (Kumar A 2001; Chandha G K 2003) is being disproved, after the introduction of MGNREGA. This series of field visits also confirm the finding that after the introduction of MGNREGA in Tamil Nadu, agriculture is no more

overcrowded given the scarcity of labour to carry out agricultural works, nor any more underpaid given the opportunity it has created for agricultural labourers to bargain for higher wages pointing finger at wages paid at MGNREGA.

The constant demand for rural labour created by MGNREGA and the hike in minimum wages set by the MGNREGA worked in favour of women and dalit landless labourers (FAO 2010). The other side of the story is that it has given dalits the impetus to hint to their land owners to have land on lease, if their land owners found difficulty carrying on with farming. Such lands from one landlord gets transferred either on lease or through sale to a few dalit families. Given the small size of holdings, dalits find no need to use machineries in agriculture. It has become family farming without involving machinery or hired labour. If at all additional labourers are required, it is met through exchange of labour between two or more dalit families. Another fact to notice here is that despite this shift taking place, wage employment in agriculture still remains a significant portion of household income in many of the dalits' families in the study villages, which requires further probing.

Mechanisation is suitable only for large scale farming, or farming at a relatively bigger scale. Small holdings neither require machineries, nor is it feasible to use machines in small size landholdings in possession of the dalits. They use own family labour and find it remunerative. The traditional land owners, who use machineries, find agriculture costly, and less remunerative. They are the ones leaving agriculture, and lease out or sell off their lands

to dalits and in a few cases to the realtors<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, much has not gone into the hands of realtors because the realtors have location-preferences in investing in land.

Given the size of dalit population in the State, one might view that it is a small percentage of dalits becoming landed class. In terms of size of holdings it's small, but it's a significant change taking place in terms of occupational and social changes in the agrarian tradition of Tamil Nadu. This inadvertence of the erstwhile landed class shifting to other sectors of the economy due to the multiplicity of opportunities opening up in other sectors has set off a positive change in favour of dalits. Dalits filling up the vacuum created by the landed class is enabling them to emerge as 'the neo-landed' class<sup>4</sup>. Land as a 'physical capital' has served to remove the 'landlessness' character of dalits; membership in SHGs, coupled with bank loan for agriculture provides them access to 'financial capital'. Their 'human capability' in agricultural pursuits serves for themselves instead of selling off their labour for wage. The value of their human capability has gone up with the new-found physical assets and access to financial help through SHGs for agricultural expenses.

This shift in the erstwhile landless agricultural wage earners becoming the land owning class marks a positive change in the lives of dalits. The rhetoric that commercial agriculture in a market-based economy would intensify widespread use of machineries in agriculture and so, dalits who are mostly agricultural labourers would be thrown out of agriculture is found to be disproved in actuality. Rather, contrary to the general hunch, the

uneconomic holdings due to the introduction of machinery have fallen into the hands of the poor who can do family farming.

Those landlords who try to use machineries in agriculture due to shortage of agricultural labour tend to quit agriculture. They settle down in towns with some business, or with their sons who are salaried. In aggregate, it could be stated that a little over one-fifths of dalits are emerging as the neo-landed class in agricultural villages in the study districts. The view of the traditional landed class towards profitability of agricultural pursuits - given the high input costs and labour shortage - seems to show a high probability towards this trend getting geared up. But, the big question is whether the new generation dalit youths are willing to take up agriculture. The response of a vast majority of the youth in the study villages revealed that they are not inclined to take up agriculture. The dalit youth are looking for opportunities outside agriculture, or they are already commuting to the town making a living offering some kind of small scale service. Some of them offer a temporary helping hand to their parents involved in the new found family asset. Nonetheless, they do not want to place their future in agricultural pursuits<sup>5</sup>.

Now, those traditional land owners who are still clinging on to agriculture are suffering not being able to get labourers. Dalits who used to sell labour for wages are busy working in their 'own lands', working for themselves - in the land that they leased in, or purchased. This further discourages the traditional land owners from continuing agriculture. This shows a tendency to accelerate the process of landholdings to fall into the hands of dalits. The

response of the traditional land owners who give up agriculture and are selling off their lands to dalits is: 'What befell on me today, awaits them [dalits] tomorrow', meaning the younger generation in dalit community are also looking for opportunities outside agriculture.

As of now, high input costs, plus labour shortage in agriculture coupled with new opportunities that opened up outside agriculture resulted in landholdings to slip from the hands of the traditional landlords into the hands of dalits. Although the chance for this trend to get common is high, the dalit youth do not show inclination towards farming. In the event of dalit youth ignoring this opportunity, it is most likely that the lands that move from the hands of land owners shall straight fall in the hands of realtors. This is a dangerous signal to agriculture in Tamil Nadu.

**Those That Got Stuck :** It is obvious that an agrarian shift is taking place in Tamil Nadu villages where dalits, though not in large numbers, are emerging as the neo-landed class. This is confirmed by Goran Djurfeldt, Athreya and others (2008) in their study of six villages in Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil Nadu. But this holds good only for the wet regions of Tamil Nadu such as Thiruvarur (or Tiruchirappalli) and to portions of agriculturally intensive districts such as Ramanathapuram. At the same time another stark reality observed mostly in dry regions or agriculturally not-so-busy districts of Tamil Nadu such as Vellore is that a vast majority of dalit population holds only their Family Ration Card as Asset No.1 of the family. There is nothing else they have as asset worth the name.

Thus, within dalits there are two classes emerging. One is those who have managed to become small land owners or sharecroppers, comparing themselves at par with the caste-Hindus they acquired the land from. The other is those who are still landless labourers and are completely dependent on 'family ration card' as the life-line asset of the family. The family ration card provides them the entitlement to a set quota of essential commodities every month. The Registration Card at the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) makes way for guaranteed employment and income for procuring the essential commodities from the Public Distribution System (PDS) shop. These two entitlements constitute the entire family assets they possess in dry regions. When one refers to family ration card in relation to dalit families, one can express without hesitation that it is an 'asset'. Indeed, the poorer dalit families pledging the family ration cards with relatively better-off dalits to be able to manage short-term financial crunch is widely prevalent in dalit villages (Palanithurai G and Ramesh R 2008).

That a section of the dalit families have become land owners from landless labourers is a significant social change in the Indian society. This is wiping out the 'landlessness character of dalit families' as stated earlier. At the same time a section of dalits are still excluded from commanding opportunities, and choices in agriculture or beyond agriculture, and often they are mired in sort of manual labour.

The safeguard and reform measures of Government of India towards dalits have

provided access to school education for dalit children; food security of dalit families through PDS; and priority loans through group lending without collateral securities, etc. However, ideas like using Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) stove instead of firewood or owning a household toilet instead of defecating in open places still sounds unfamiliar to them. Their priorities are: ration rice, firewood from the commons, and sufficient supply of drinking water on the common tap. Although that a few are becoming neo-landed class is soothing, making a qualitative analysis of the plausibility behind their priorities, and the deprivation they undergo is disturbing.

In terms of addressing absolute poverty that market-favouring policies was feared to push dalits into, adequate safeguards have been in place. In terms of relative deprivation, dalits have really lost. Dalits have remained excluded from being enabled to profit from the opportunities and choices brought about as market-based arrangements such as quality education, for example. They have managed to fill the vacuum created in the agriculture sector by the caste-Hindus. They are yet to have their capabilities enhanced to grab the opportunities at par with them [caste-Hindus] in other sectors of the economy. Chakravarthy S and Somanathan E (2008) note in their special article in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), that graduates belonging to scheduled castes or scheduled tribes get significantly lower wages (19 per cent lower in domestic jobs and 35 per cent lower in foreign jobs) than those in the general category. This large wage difference is due to the weaker (on average) academic performance of SC/ST candidates.

**Inter-generational Livelihoods :** The change taking place in the inter-generational livelihoods of dalits is considerable. The social stigma or social discrimination of dalits was mainly due to the type of activities and functions they were engaged in. This study finds extensively that the youth are no more getting into the shoes of their parents. Market-based social connectedness as a general trend in Indian society over the years brought about significant positive changes in the lives of dalits. The youth have become mobile. They get connected with the contractors in the town and are engaged. They are after multiple livelihoods and activities, away from the traditional ones that attached a social stigma. The middle-aged and aged dalits are becoming land owners as well. The nature of agriculture they are engaged in is subsistence farming using family labour and so, they find it remunerative. The landless labourers among dalits get seasonal employment in agriculture and get engaged under the MGNREGA during agriculturally off-season.

### Concluding Remarks

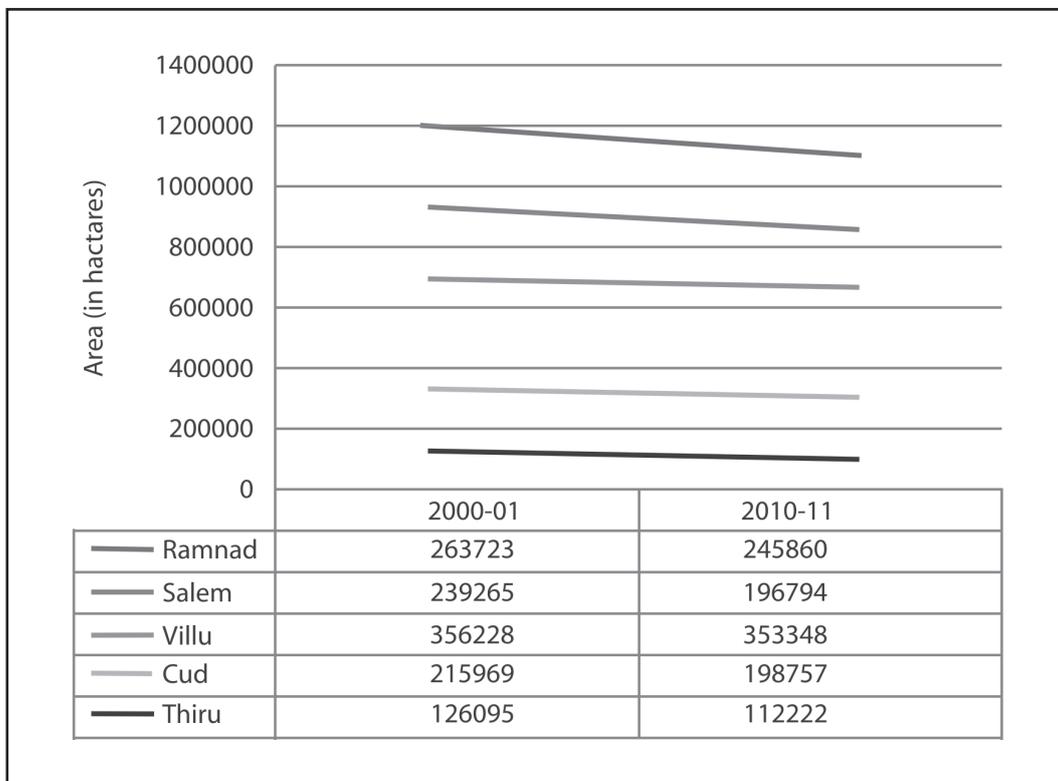
Within dalits although there are several castes such as parayar, pallar, chakkiliar and so on, this study concludes that clearly there are only two classes that have emerged within them. One is those who have managed to become either small land owners or at least share-croppers and draw analogy with the caste-Hindus they acquired the land from. The other are those who are still landless labourers and completely depend on family ration card as the life-line asset of the family. Besides this, the shift from sub-human existence as untouchables to land owning class, and the

younger ones aspiring to move beyond agriculture is worth noting. Neo-liberal economic policies because of its intrinsic market nature is taking away many of the social stigma through information, mobility, and connectedness. Yet in order to find wider

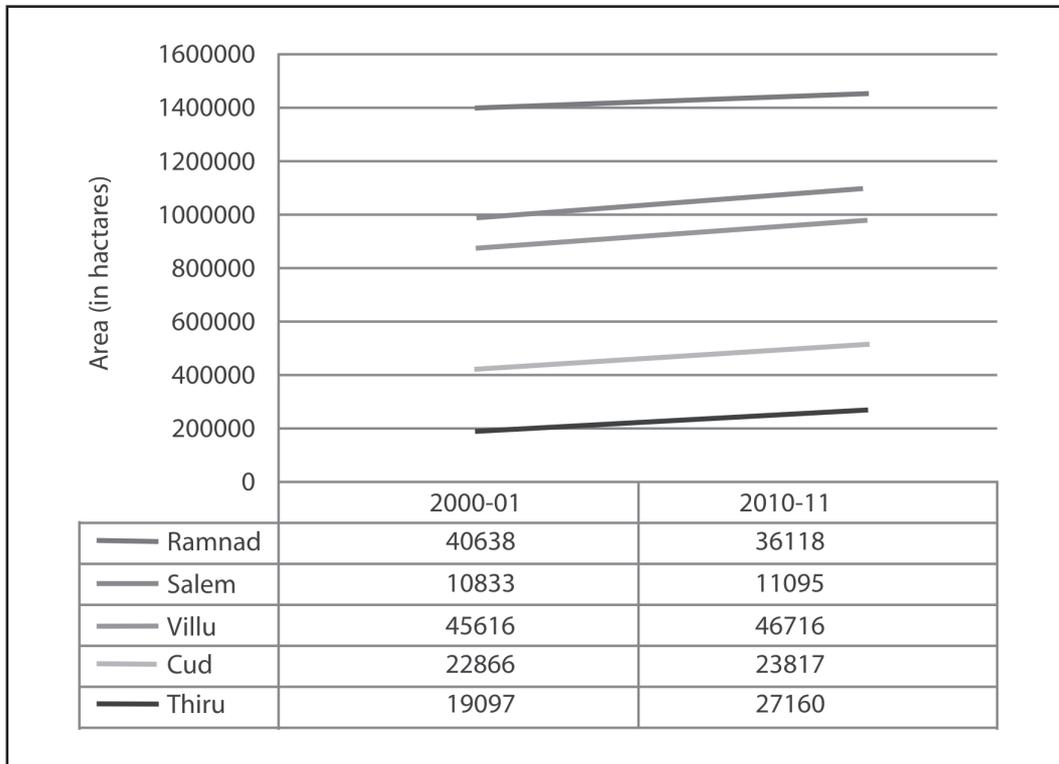
economic opportunities and get out of the poverty trap, the dalits have to move beyond agriculture and beyond manual labour making use of reform and affirmative measures of the government of India.

### Annexure

#### Landholdings by Non-dalits (2000 - 2010)



Source: Agricultural Census, (Gol) 2000-01 & 2010-11.

**Landholdings by Dalits (2000 - 2010)**

Source: Agricultural Census, (GoI) 2000-01 & 2010-11.

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**Notes**

1. The word 'dalit' comes from Marathi language. Dalit in Marathi language means 'the oppressed', 'crushed' or 'broken to pieces'. It came to be used in the 19th Century in the context of the caste oppression faced by the erstwhile untouchable castes from the Hindu castes. The word was also used by Dr B R Ambedkar in his Marathi speeches in the 1920s and 1930s. Now, it is found in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th Edition).
2. This tendency could be recorded - across the study districts - ranging from 20 to 30 per cent.
3. The scale of this change is not massive - but considerable.
4. It was found in all the study districts put together on average one-fifth of the total land owning farmers have either leased out or sold out their lands to dalit families.
5. These youth migrated to engage themselves as construction workers, rod benders and manual labourers in laying telephone cables in cities like Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru. Dalit youth from Thiruvarur are employed in garment industries in Thirupur, Erode, and Coimbatore; and in bus body building industries in Karur. There are others employed as casual labourers in the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) complex in Cuddalore. There are some employed in the Multi-National Companies (MNCs) of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Cheyyar near Chennai. Over 3000 young men and women including 800 dalits from around Kancheepuram and Sriperumbudur are (near Chennai) working in Nokia Electronics, Nixon, and at Nike athletic shoes manufacturing company run by a Taiwanese MNC. Dalit youth from Ramanathapuram villages have left for Middle East to work as masons, rode benders, centring workers, and masonry helpers.

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