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**Increasing consumption, decreasing support: a multi-generational study of  
family relations among South Indian Chakkliyors**

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Drawing on research undertaken in two Chakkliyar neighbourhoods in rural Tamil Nadu, it is argued here that while there can have been no golden age for the filial support of ageing parents, recent social and economic policies are creating a situation where sons are less able and less willing to support their parents. It is not only the post-1991 economic changes that are having this effect but also longer term changes in the rural economy together with policies that have raised expectations regarding the needs and rights of children, irrespective of caste, and of Scheduled Caste people. In order to understand how social and economic policies are impacting on intergenerational relations it is necessary to understand the logic underlying the distribution of family resources across the generations. This distribution is based on differential conceptions of personhood, and their associated needs, which change across the life-course and as social and economic conditions change. The argument here is that social and economic policies that have been directed at developing the country and strengthening what are known as ‘weaker sections’ can have and are having a negative impact on older people precisely because policies are conceived in reference to what is thought of as the working adult generation and children, rather than towards ageing populations. These policies are formulated on the assumption that what benefits younger people will benefit the old because ‘in India sons support

their parents'. It is on the basis of this assumption of universal filial support that the State's provision for old-age social assistance is limited to destitute men and women without surviving adult sons. In promoting particular social and economic policies, and as a consequence of the policies themselves, the State has created a significant and widening 'needs gap' between younger and older generations by raising the needs and aspirations of younger generations both absolutely and in comparison to the perceived needs of older people. For the two neighbourhoods studied in western Tamil Nadu, increased aspirations and perceived needs have not been matched by increased means. Instead current patterns of intergenerational resource flows not only suggest increasing consumption on the part of younger adults and children and decreasing support for older parents but that older parents are themselves funding the younger generations' rising consumption patterns.

## THE VILLAGES

In 2000, I studied intergenerational relations in two villages located in the relatively prosperous area of western Tamil Nadu that is Coimbatore District. Despite being located ten kilometres apart the villages have diametrically opposed economic histories which, by shaping the context in which intergenerational relations operate, condition those relations. One village studied, that I shall call the 'connected village', is on the main route to a growing administrative, industrial and educational centre which is sited ten kilometres away. The village is also connected to other villages by bus. Its fields are irrigated by dam water every second year. Paddy and sugarcane are grown during the year of irrigation. In the alternate year 'dry crops' (cereals and vegetables) are sown; these rely on monsoon rains or deep bore wells. In both years of

the agricultural cycle women labourers get planting, harvesting and weeding work. Only a small number of the younger men, that is those who harvest coconuts, have regular agricultural work; for the vast majority of men agricultural work is limited to digging furrows during the year of irrigation. Compared to the men and women of the village described below, the labourers in the 'connected village' have more regular work; their easy access to other villages and the growing administrative centre means that contractors will collect men to work on construction sites and road building and women to work in fields situated within a fifteen kilometre radius. Barring a handful of very wealthy farmers who live on the outskirts of the village, the village is generally poor. The only Scheduled Caste people in the village describe themselves as Arunthathiyars, as 'traditionally' night-soil sweepers and drummers but whose main work is casual labour in the fields or construction sites.<sup>1</sup> According to the census they accounted for 24% of the village's 3,000 inhabitants in 1991. They live in two neighbourhoods, an old *cherri* and a new one, located on the outskirts of the village.<sup>2</sup> The land for the new *cherri* was provided by the government. While the village remains poor it is in a much better position than it was. The Arunthathiyar report considerable poverty in the first half of the 20th Century that forced the younger Arunthathiyar to migrate to tea and coffee plantations for work. The building of the

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<sup>1</sup> In Tamil Nadu, what used to be called the Paraiyar caste were drummers and Arunthathiyars are more generally associated with leather work. However, 'traditional occupations' can be locally specific, especially in villages where only one 'untouchable' caste resides. In this context the 'untouchable caste' would be required to perform all tasks considered defiling by other castes irrespective of their 'traditional' occupation.

<sup>2</sup> Historically Scheduled Castes are not permitted to live in the village proper but were forced to live in exclusively 'untouchable' neighbourhoods (a *cherri*) which were located outside the village. This practice continues even in today's government-supported programmes.

dams and associated canal system in the Western Ghats in the 1950s not only stemmed the flow of out-migration but encouraged return migration and the continuing demand for labourers on construction sites and infrastructural projects (road building and, since 2000, the laying down of fibre-optic cables) has increased the availability of work for younger men.

The second village is an economically polarised village whose previous good fortune is now in decline. Prior to the building of the dams the village benefited from the plentiful ground water that collected at the foot of the Western Ghats and allowed the village to become a centre of chilli and cotton production. This groundwater provided the economic base for a number of wealthy Gounder and Naicker/Naidu farmers, some of whom moved into cotton processing in nearby towns. Fearing its fields would become too wet to grow chilli and cotton the village's farmers chose not to be linked into the large scale irrigation system initiated in the 1950s. Since then the water table has dropped considerably and cotton is blighted by disease. Farmers are now planting the much less profitable 'dry crops' and are entirely reliant on the vagaries of localised rainfall or on deep tube wells. As there is only an infrequent bus service which bypasses the village on a road located three kilometres beyond its outskirts, the village is relatively isolated both from other villages and the main town. Unlike the 'connected village' this one has many large dwellings that are now empty as wealthier families pursue better economic and educational prospects elsewhere. This village which I shall call here the 'remote village' has a large population of Madaris, a Chakkliyar sub-caste, again sited in an old and a new *cherri*. The government provided the land for both cherris as well as the majority of houses in the

old *cherri*. The Madari's traditional occupation is that of 'sweeping'.<sup>3</sup> Now only those in most economic need sweep the toilets of caste Hindus: that is, only elderly Madari women do this work. A small number of older Madari's beg. Women do planting, weeding and harvesting in the village's fields that are located three kilometres beyond the village. When nearby villages receive irrigation water younger women walk in the opposite direction, away from the village and village fields, to wait on the road hoping that contractors will take them for fieldwork elsewhere. Men get most of their work, that is digging work, in the fields of the surrounding villages during the year of irrigation. As with the Arunthathiyar, no Madari own or rent agricultural land. In recent years a number of younger Madaris have migrated to urban areas in search of work.

Over the 20th Century the fortunes of these two villages have reversed. The 'remote village' was once a wealthy village but now that its access to water and opportunities for work have severely declined younger people from farming and labouring families are migrating out of the village. Unlike the 'connected village', this village's wealth differentials enables a small number of older men and women to survive by begging. By contrast, the 'connected village', was a desperately poor village whose fortunes were turned around by the building of the dams and canal. Since then its much greater and more regular access to water and bus services has significantly expanded work opportunities for younger people, particularly in the fields and construction sites

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<sup>3</sup> Again this community are the only 'untouchable caste' in the 'remote village'. The Arunthathiyar and Madari in these two villages do not inter-marry; they consider the other as below themselves in the caste hierarchy.

beyond the village, have stemmed the flow of out migration by the Arunthathiyar.

Even so, the prevalence of malnutrition amongst this caste indicates that they continue to suffer from significant chronic poverty.

#### NEED, PERSONHOOD AND INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT

It is now well established that family members do not have equal access to family resources. Most research on unequal distribution of family resources in India has focused on one aspect of personhood, that of gender. This has been used to explain the gap between the life expectancies, life chances and welfare of girls, women and widows and their male counterparts (see for example Papanek 1990; Sen 1990; Croll 2001; Nillesen and Harriss-White 2004; Amin and Khondoker 2004). The significance of age as a determinant of personhood and its impact on access to family resources for older people are less well researched (for exceptions see Lamb 2000; Dreze 1990; Gillespie and McNeill 1992; Vera-Sanso 2004). Instead of examining the relationship between concepts of personhood and need the vast majority of research into old age support in India operates with a number of assumptions. First, that by tradition adult sons support their ageing parents. Second, that the care and resources parents receive are adequate for their needs. Third, that charting residential proximity to sons is an adequate proxy for the study of actual resource flows. Fourth, that negative trends, evidenced by low levels of households based on the stem or 'joint' family, are best understood as a consequence of urbanisation and modernisation.

There is not adequate room to discuss these assumptions in any detail here. But for the purposes of this article a few comments are required.<sup>4</sup> The main weakness in much of the literature investigating filial support lies in a failure to site these relations within the wider context of the family, economy and society. The fundamental error is a misunderstanding of the competing responsibilities men have to their natal and conjugal families, and their manifestation in residential patterns and resource flows. Part of the problem is the continuing assumption that the 'joint' family is the 'norm' for India. This takes at face value an ideal that masks the reality that all families break into smaller units, based on the conjugal family, at some stage in the family cycle. In most instances these smaller units remain in the same location by subdividing homes or properties while maintaining separate domestic budgeting. There is, however, a class-based difference between the experience of family division: due to the structural pressure to increase the ratio of workers to dependents, the poorest families are unable to sustain stem families as long as better-off families can.<sup>5</sup>

What accounts for both the breaking of the stem family into smaller units based on the conjugal family and for the extent of filial support for older parents is that men's primary responsibility is to meet the needs of their conjugal family. Their responsibility for their parents' welfare is both shared with all their brothers and secondary to their responsibilities to their conjugal family. It is not only custom that defines men's responsibilities in this manner; the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973

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<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of these assumptions see Vera-Sanso (2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Vera-Sanso (2004, 1999) and Dreze (1990) on the factors shaping residential patterns and the impact these have on intergenerational resource flows.

(Section 125, 1, d) and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 (Section 20, 3) predicate a son's duty to support 'aged and infirm parents' on the parents being unable to maintain themselves out of their own earnings or property. The Code of Criminal Procedure allows the Courts to impose orders for support where persons *'having sufficient means neglects or refuses to maintain'* a parent (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act allocates the share of responsibility for maintenance according to shares in estate or coparcenary property. In other words, a man's duty is not that of supporting his ageing parents but that of *contributing* to the support of his parents if and when they need it but only if, and to the extent that, he is able to do so, bearing in mind his share of the coparcenary property.<sup>7</sup> The outcome is that while wealthy parents are deemed not to require support (and certainly in Tamil Nadu do not appear to receive it), impoverished sons struggle to provide any support. Indeed, the latter may rely on transfers *from* their ageing and elderly parents (Vera-Sanso 2004; Dreze 1990; Caldwell 1988).

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<sup>6</sup> The Courts have determined that only married daughters with an income independent have a duty to support parents unable to support themselves. This upholds the norms that support in old age is primarily a son's duty and, more significantly, that old age support is itself contingent: it should not impinge on either the needs of the conjugal family nor on a man's (in this case the son-in-law's) capacity to meet those needs.

<sup>7</sup> In the two cherris studied it was not uncommon for brothers to agree amongst themselves that one or more brothers could be freed from their duty to contribute to parental support in old age in exchange for renouncing their share of the parental home.

It is the son's decision (not the parents') as to how much he can support his parents, what they need and when they need it.<sup>8</sup> He does so by assessing the needs of his conjugal family and those of his parents. Fundamental to the determination of intergenerational resource flows, then, is the link between personhood and perception of needs. The argument I am putting forward in this article is that because perceptions of younger people's needs have risen significantly since Independence and liberalisation of the economy, but those of the aged have not, there is now a significant 'needs gap' between younger and older people. This is due to the view widespread throughout India (and elsewhere) that old people have limited needs as compared with younger people.<sup>9</sup>

#### PERSONHOOD IN OLD AGE

In India the ageing process is thought to be one of declining sensual appetites (Vatuk 1990); a process that is as much marked by life-stage (Lamb 2000) as by functional age. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, once all of their children have married men and women are classed as old (*vaiysu*). They are described as having had their life, *vaalkai mudinchi pochu*: literally 'life, having finished/been completed, is gone'. What is meant by this phrase is that older people have enjoyed the 'pleasures' of life (pleasures that are considered to be the prerogative of younger people) and that period being over, older people are expected to turn to a simpler way of life without

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<sup>8</sup> Dreze (1990) notes that this is the case throughout India, barring West Bengal where widow's inheritance of a share of their husband's property increases their bargaining power *vis-a-vis* their sons.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Møller & Ferreira's (2003) study of the impact of non-contributory pensions across South Africa's black and coloured households. This study exemplifies how the needs of younger people are deemed to take priority over older people's needs even in relation to older people's pensions.

the 'luxuries' of youth. While what counts as a luxury will vary by class, there is an expectation that older people have reduced needs for the pleasures (and costs) associated with appearance, for the privacy associated with physical intimacy, for comforts and entertainment and they are deemed to have less of an appetite for food, both in terms of quantity and flavour.<sup>10</sup> This class-based variation in what counts as a luxury is clearly exemplified by toothbrushes and toothpaste which in better off households is deemed to be a basic need for everyone, irrespective of age, while amongst the Madari and Arunthathiyar studied in rural Tamil Nadu they are considered a young person's luxury.<sup>11</sup> In summary, older parents are expected to have few needs, although what counts as an older person's need will vary by class. In the case of the impoverished Madari and Arundhahiyar studied in rural Tamil Nadu regular needs were limited to a small quantity of simple food, betel nut, tobacco, a few second-hand clothes and simple agricultural tools.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, ageing parents are considered to have limited financial needs as compared with younger generations. In the case of the poor, sons deem older people's needs are readily met by very small incomes and pensions.

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<sup>10</sup> This expectation may underlie Gillespie and McNeill's finding that even in better off households the nutritional status of people aged sixty and over is 'considerably worse' than that of younger people (Gillespie and McNeill 1992: 98).

<sup>11</sup> In these households, older people use their finger to rub their teeth with ash which, in many cases, has eroded older people's teeth through to the dentine.

<sup>12</sup> Betel nut is used to stave off hunger. Landless labourers need to supply their own tools to secure work. Medical care is limited to free eye camps, though not every older person had the bus fare into town to access the eye camps.

As parental need relates to both life-stage as well as functional capacity the status of 'old' is deeply contested. This is not only because what is defined as old in life-stage and functional terms may not coincide in practice but the status of 'old' confers differential needs, rights and obligations (Vera-Sanso 2006).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, a parent whose children are married can be classed as 'old', *vaiysu* in Tamil, in relation to needs while not being classed as 'old' in other contexts. In terms of both practical or financial filial support, the issue revolves around parents' capacity to support or look after themselves. 'Old' is seen in relation to an activity: that is, too old to do housework; too old to undertake or secure work of an appropriate status. In practice parents and sons differ in their assessments as to when the former have reached that stage. In impoverished families sons may only regard their parents as 'too old to work' when they are consistently refused work during periods of high labour demand. Only two categories of ageing parents are deemed to be unequivocally in need of financial support. The first consists of those for whom work is not *parrakkam* (literally habit), that is those individuals who have had little, if any, experience of paid work: predominantly non-working women and disabled people. The second comprises people whose sons deem them to be too old or to have become too disabled to work.<sup>14</sup> Among the Chakkliyers studied the parents who are excepted from these

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<sup>13</sup> With smaller families, early marriages and early widowhood it is possible for people to be classed as old in social terms while still functionally young. Similarly, extended education, later marriages and late births can mean a person remains young in social terms despite reduced functional capacities. The former is more likely to occur in impoverished families and the latter in better-off families (Vera-Sanso 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See Erb and Harris-White (2002) who found that not only was old age a major source of disability in rural Tamil Nadu but also that class/caste and gender significantly determined the degree of disability people had to endure before they were deemed to be unable to work or undertake housework.

two categories are those receiving a pension or who have other sources of income (eg rental income from letting a room, begging). This is because sons assume parental incomes meet their reduced needs. In terms of practical support men, who are by definition unable to cook or do their own washing (Vera-Sanso 1994), are more likely to be deemed in need of practical support than are women (see also Erb and Harris-White 2002). The latter are considered able to cook and clean and therefore not in need of a daughter-in-law's help unless they are very frail or disabled. Amongst the Chakkiliyars in the 'remote' and 'connected' villages the only people receiving continuous financial support or regular physical care are one older woman who had never worked and parents who are too frail or disabled to be given work even in periods of high labour demand. For the remainder financial and practical support is at best intermittent, occurring only when work is scarce or during longer illnesses.

As filial support is predicated on perceived parental need, sons may take the position that parental income, no matter what its source or scale, obviates their duty to support their parents. Thus the sons of those elderly, landless, people who have the opportunity to beg from landed high-caste families, as occurs in the 'remote village', consider themselves no more obligated to support their parents than do the sons of wealthy people. While wealthy parents may agree with their son's interpretation of their need, the older Chakkiliyars studied swing between two views: they maintain that their sons cannot afford to 'feed' them as well as their families but when they consider some of the things their son's money is being spent on, they complain bitterly that their sons are flouting the norm of filial support. Even those receiving intermittent support from sons frequently claim their sons are flouting the norm of

filial support. Oscillating between self-support during periods of high demand for agricultural labour and dependence during periods of low demand, including circulating between a number of sons, they claim they are made to feel like beggars; a tactic used by younger people to encourage parents to be self-supporting. The main complaint is that food is not offered when they are hungry, occasionally it is not offered at all - they are being forced to ask for food. As food is *the* marker of filial support, this is seen by parents as a rebuttal of filial obligation. To avoid the humiliation parents turn to other potential sources of food, for example they visit another son or daughter as *guests*, and return to self-support as soon as work becomes available.<sup>15</sup> It is this indeterminacy around parental need and ability to be self-supporting combined with expanding consumption demands from their conjugal families in a context of severe poverty that explains the negligible transfer of resources from sons to parents.

#### INCREASED CONSUMPTION

Perceptions of the reduced needs and capacities of the 'old' that can be seen within families and legislation also informs social and economic policies. Setting aside the issue of the standard of living possible on the tiny State pensions available to the destitute, most social and economic policies are orientated towards younger generations in their conception and/or implementation. Even when policies, or programmes, do not have age barriers, officials, acting more as gatekeepers than

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<sup>15</sup> Amongst the Chakkliyars studied parents never asked their sons for money, consequently this strategy was only available to parents with a number of children living nearby and those who have consciously put money aside for bus fares.

implementers, impose age barriers at the local level. For example, an elderly childless Madari woman reported to me that she had been refused the subsidised toilet being offered to each household in the *cherri* on the grounds that she had no need of such a 'luxury' herself and had no children to pass it on to. It would be a mistake to argue that policies orientated towards improving the productive capacities of younger generations or social justice for Scheduled Castes will benefit older people because the potential impact will be mitigated by a widening intergenerational 'needs gap'. Similarly it would be mistaken to argue on the grounds of poor policy effectiveness that policies promoting younger generations' interests can have little more than negligible impact on intergenerational relations. It is the rhetoric surrounding the policies, not simply their implementation, that impinges on intergenerational relations; it does this by creating, or amplifying, needs . Whether the need is met or not is, in a sense, irrelevant. Its significance lies in the ranking of need and personhood; the more a need is promoted the greater its chances of taking precedence over the needs of other categories of person.

Many of the social and economic policies pursued since Independence have had a direct impact on intergenerational relations. In South India, alongside the widespread penetration of concepts of childhood, dependency and immaturity, have come greater acceptance of the right of children to education, a decline in the amount of work required of them and their greater access both to modern medical facilities and to goods purchased in the monetarised economy (Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell 1998). In rural Tamil Nadu, for example, several of my Scheduled Caste informants were bonded as agricultural labourers when they were children. In 2000 the situation was

very different. Although there were still a few bonded children, no families had set up new relationships of bondage using their children. Additionally, if unmarried, non-bonded sons did work they kept their earnings for their sole use.<sup>16</sup> Not only are children more 'expensive' because of the loss of income but educational costs are comparatively high and rising. Despite the costs, education is widely recognised as vital for success in life. Although schooling is ostensibly free, the costs of uniforms, books etc. have to be met by parents; subsidies for Scheduled Caste families do not meet all costs and are based on a system of reimbursements. In this context, where expectations regarding the rights of children have not been matched by support for the rights of older people, sons feel increasingly pressurised to overlook their parent's need for support.

In 1991 India began a structural adjustment programme that has increased both integration into the global market and poverty by raising unemployment, holding down wages notwithstanding inflation and government cuts in social spending and subsidies (Dasgupta 2005). The consequence has been a significant extension of the demands conjugal families are placing on family resources. Dropping import barriers has considerably expanded consumption patterns for younger generations. Prior to the recent reduction of import barriers a father's duty towards his children was to provide a home, arrange their marriages, foster his son's livelihood and to meet ritually defined obligations between his family and his children's marital families. The expenses this entailed varied according to region and social status but were

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<sup>16</sup> Whereas unmarried, working daughters, whose needs remain ranked below those of their brothers, handed their incomes over to their mother.

generally high compared with income: many Madari and Arunthathiyar, for instance, were forced into bondage to meet these costs. Now people on low-incomes are being confronted by a much wider range of products packaged in quantities small enough for them to purchase. Recognising the higher profits made on small quantities international companies (selling products such as shampoo, washing powders and so on) are actively targeting the poor and are doing so with some success in the cherris studied. This edging of a culture orientated towards securing wellbeing for the next generation (through arranged marriages, training etc) to one that additionally requires people to express their status through the expansion of day-to-day consumption significantly enlarges the demands of the conjugal family. As parental need is secondary to the needs of the conjugal family, these heightened demands on a family's resources jeopardise ageing and elderly people's access to filial support.

In the cherris probably the most important newly created need has arisen out of the complex of discourses opposing untouchability and the caste system that have been generated nationally through political and policy arenas, particularly through the Dravidian and Dalit movements.<sup>17</sup> At one time Scheduled Caste people were forced to mark their 'untouchability' through their occupation, specified social relations with higher castes and through their appearance. They were not allowed to wear upper garments, footwear, clean clothes or silver and gold jewellery nor were they allowed

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<sup>17</sup> While the focus here is on the impact of anti-untouchability rhetoric, the form that policies rooted in these discourses take can impact significantly on intergenerational relations. For example, in both the cherris studied government provision of housing to young families has not only located sons and their parents in different cherris but has also undermined any potential leverage that housing, and its inheritance, might confer on parents (Vera-Sanso 2004).

to put oil or flowers in their hair. These were status markers reserved for caste Hindus, as was educating one's children. A heightened consciousness of their rights, combined with their increased access both to state schools and marketed goods has raised the aspirations of Scheduled Caste people, who now feel a strong need to maintain the markers of a socially valued identity that other castes take for granted. Not only are these needs seen as the prerogative of younger Scheduled Caste people, again raising the level of their needs in relation to those of older people, but they place a significant burden on households whose incomes are generally the lowest and most insecure.

The changing perception of the needs of children and younger people created by social and economic policies, and the rhetoric surrounding them, have had a significant impact on subjectivities and consumption patterns in the two cherris; now younger people describe themselves as *nagariham* (civilised, modern, developed) and express this through the purchase of marketed goods. I quote from fieldnotes taken while discussing changing consumption patterns with a number of older Madari women.

‘The young people are more *nagariham* (civilised, modern, developed) now. They know more about the world, it is because they are educated. While we weren’t educated the younger ones (in their early twenties) have studied at least to 5th standard. They are wanting to spend money on entertainment. In our time we either went to work or stayed at home. Domestic work was very heavy, we only got paid in crops still on the stalk. These had to be taken off the stalk,

dehusked, cleaned, ground, cooked. Everything was very labour intensive so we had little time for entertainments and as everyone was mostly paid in crop there was little money for buying things. At that time there were only dry crops. Now people only eat rice, they call dry crops 'animal feed'. Rice costs more to buy than dry crops - it is already prepared. Young people now give much importance to entertainment and cosmetics. They are also buying many things by instalments, even dresses and make-up items. Over the last ten years men are now coming here (from the nearby town) and selling things, dresses, blouses, cosmetics, etc on hire purchase. These people come and sell their things from door to door in our streets (something they have long done in middle class areas).<sup>18</sup> The men are not from our *cherri*. We only buy second hand clothes but the young ones won't wear them. I bought this (second-hand) sari from outside the Monday market (in the local town) at an 'auction' for Rs9.'

Social and economic policy has changed consumption patterns by expanding the needs of certain sections of the population, that is children, younger adults and Scheduled Castes. In this expansion older people have not been targeted quite simply because they are not deemed by anyone, including themselves, to be users of the products and services being pushed. They do not require education, nor do they need entertainment, new clothes, cosmetics, toothpaste and so on. Their need is for a limited amount of food and betel nut or tobacco to suppress their appetite. These needs are judged by sons and daughters-in-law to be easily met by parental incomes,

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<sup>18</sup> Several people in the town told me that village people are 'hungry' for urban products and a lot of money can be made by those willing to take goods to the villages. A number of pyramid companies are specifically targeting villagers, including the North American company, Amway.

who are generally paid the same *coolī* rate as younger men and women. It is the needs of a man's conjugal family that have increased and it is to these people, not his parents, that a man is deemed to have a primary duty of support.

#### DECREASED MEANS

Discussions with Madari and Arunthathiyar indicate that the agricultural system has changed profoundly within living memory and these have had a significant impact on intergenerational relations. The direction has been one of increasing commoditisation and monetarisation of land and labour. Because of their different resource bases the history and consequences of economic transformation differ between the two villages despite their close proximity.

Elderly Madari and Arunthathiyar report that when they were young the main crops were the dry crops of *cholam*, *ragi* and *cumbu* and labourers were paid in kind. They would be given a bundle of crop to take home which, after cleaning and husking would amount to two *vellum* of grain which was enough to last a family for four days. In the 'remote village', that prior to the building of the dams and canal in the 1950s enjoyed an ample ground water supply, informants told me:

'At harvest time everybody had four *moottai* (jute bags) of grain in their house. So we didn't feel the need to go for work everyday. When we were paid in grain there was enough food in the house for all the family. The old people didn't have to go for work and they were fed by their families. Only since the coming of the dams and the canal has there been hunger in our homes.'

However, in the 'connected village', that at the time relied entirely on the monsoon, no one speaks of the period before the dams and canal in favourable terms. Although they received the same volume of crop when they worked, there was little demand for their labour because local farmers, who were themselves poor, relied on labour exchanges within their caste. Instead of having enough food to feed all the family the droughts were so bad that many of the Arunthathiyar were forced to migrate to hill stations in search of work on tea and coffee plantations. Only when there was more work in the area did they return to the village; initially to earn *coolli* (day wages) building the dams and canal. Work on the dams not only encouraged return migration to the 'connected village' but also encouraged migration by Pallars and Paraiyars from poorer areas of Tamil Nadu to establish their own cherris in nearby villages.

Prior to the building of the dams in the 1950s, people had limited access to money. When they needed cash to build a house, or to cover marriage or funeral expenses men became pannaiyals (bonded labourers). In the 'remote village' there was the possibility of receiving cash when working on cash crops, in this case cotton and chilli. In the 'connected village', however, men and women first received cash for their labour when they were paid *coolli* to build the local dams. In order to gain access to better value cash work families in both cherris would arrange for adult pannaiyals to be replaced by younger boys (from the age of ten years). At the time this was considered a good way for young boys to learn their trade as agricultural labourers - it formed their apprenticeship and, in addition to the annual wage from which a proportion of the original loan and subsequent advances were deducted, most received

one cooked meal per day. While today young people see bonded labour as exploitative, a trap from which families cannot escape (largely because the rates of pay are not only low but do not rise over time), the elderly men who have remained pannaiyals all their life, tend to take pride in what they see as a system of patronage in which their needs are met. They reported that when they became too old to work their pannaiyars released from their bond despite having not repaid their debt.<sup>19</sup>

The process of monetarisation of agricultural work increased with the dam irrigation in the 'connected village' and the sinking water table in the 'remote village' which forced the better off farmers to invest in tube wells. In the 'connected village' farmers started growing paddy and sugarcane; barring the harvesting of paddy, all work was paid for in cash. The older Arunthathiyar claim they were never asked to work in the paddy fields except to clean the field after harvesting.<sup>20</sup> Instead work in the paddy fields was given to the higher status Scheduled Castes, the Pallars and Paraiyars, living in nearby villages. In the 'remote village' farmers continued growing cotton and chilli until relatively recently when they could not rid the cotton of pests. As prices for *cholam*, *ragi* and *cumbu* dropped farmers in both villages turned to vegetable growing. Labour on these new crops were paid for in cash. Now the Madari and Arunthathiyar never receive payment in kind except for those in the 'remote village' who clean paddy or sweep toilets. With increased monetarisation has

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<sup>19</sup> Between these two extremes lies another experience - several men aged 40 or under say they managed to work off their bond by persuading someone (who was willing to pay higher wages) to buy their bond off their *pannaiyar* - thereby establishing a new relation of bondage.

<sup>20</sup> According to some they were not asked because they did not have the skills, according to others they needed to be paid regularly for their work and could not wait until harvest time to receive the paddy.

come increased casualisation; farmers are now unwilling to establish new relations of bondage with the Madari and Arunthathiyar; their need to retain a supply of non-specialised labour being much reduced, they have no wish to lend large sums of money to labourers. Instead farmers want access to a large number of workers at critical periods in the agricultural cycle and, in the case of larger farmers, a small number of people with the range of skills, including literacy, needed on farms working with a complex mix of crops, techniques and inputs.<sup>21</sup> For the latter alone large farmers are willing to sign annual contracts. This inability to find someone to loan large sums of money (Rs3,000-Rs20,000 when compared with daily wage rates of Rs60 for men and Rs35-45 for women) forces families into more commercial forms of borrowing and leaves them without the safety net some of the elderly Chakkliyars report.

The opening of the economy has amplified the economic pressures associated with production and consumption. The combination of increased perceived needs for children and other Scheduled Caste people and the consequences of producing for an increasingly liberalised market has meant that farmers and labourers are more concerned to increase their profit margins/returns for labour. Farmers are attempting to reduce their labour costs and to gain greater control over the labour process in order to lower their vulnerability to labour shortages during key periods of the agricultural cycle. The small number of large farmers whose contracts with companies in the global North increase the pressure for greater control over production are importing

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<sup>21</sup> Farmers, often through contractors, tend to 'book' workers for two to three days at a time. A small advance of up to one day's *coolii* is given to seal the booking.

labourers from poorer areas of Tamil Nadu on annual contracts.<sup>22</sup> Farmers, and the newly emergent breed of 'neo-farmers' (that is, urban professionals and partially educated young men from semi-skilled working class families who are looking for trouble-free investments) are taking up farming practices which need limited labour inputs. Many farmers are now focusing on raising young chicks for forty-five days for large companies selling chicken products on the global market; an agricultural equivalent of contracting out. Large areas of land, which less than a decade ago were under cereals and vegetables, are now being turned over to tree cultivation: coconut, bananas and teak, some of which will be exported (particularly the coconut oil). These strategies are facilitated by the Tamil Nadu government which is subsidising drip feed irrigation of trees and encouraging chicken production. Both these strategies drastically reduce the amount of labour required on farms. However, it is the planting of trees which is having the most impact and all Madari and Arunthathiyar, irrespective of age, are acutely aware of the consequences for their livelihoods of the turn towards tree cultivation from the labour intensive paddy, sugarcane and vegetable crops. By comparison with the 'connected village', this has impacted significantly on younger people from the 'remote village' whose opportunities for work in their village is already reduced due to the dropping water table. They are increasingly forced to turn to labour contractors who offer lower rates of pay for work in fields that are sufficiently far away to necessitate transport. In both villages the people most affected are older people - they are only called for work when there are not enough young people to do it in the time allotted.

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<sup>22</sup> Breman (1996) describes patterns of labour control that force labourers into seasonal migration, organised through contractors, by not giving them the work that is available locally.

Farmers who are continuing to grow paddy, sugarcane and vegetables for the national market are also having to find the means to lower the uncertainties and vulnerabilities to which they are subject during periods of peak labour demand. From the farmers' perspective labourers do not come when they say they will and do not put their back into the work. One way of increasing control of the labour process is to hire contractors to secure and supervise day-labourers. The other has been the use of *mottam*, sometimes paid directly to a member of a work gang or to a contractor who forms a work gang for the task. The *mottam* contract differs from the usual *coolli* wage by being a fixed payment for a fixed task, whereas a *coolli* wage is paid for a day's work. Consequently a work gang increases its earnings by ensuring it takes on only the fittest and fastest workers and by keeping their number small. The effect of both these systems has been to reduce the amount of work available to older labourers and in the case of *mottam* to reduce the spread of work among younger ones. But, as Kapadia (1995) noted in Tiruchi amongst women agricultural labourers, it is the workers themselves who, in seeing an opportunity to increase their incomes, are actively marginalising other labourers through the *mottam* contract. In my view, the reason why younger men (and it is only men who do *mottam* work in these villages) favour *mottam* contracts is because of the pressure towards greater, and more diversified, consumption patterns that agricultural labourers, including Chakkliyors, are now subject. To give the flavour of younger and older labourers' experiences I shall quote from field notes taken when I was discussing older men's ability to get work with a group of men of mixed ages in the remote village. It should be born in mind that this account is equally representative of the experience and viewpoint of the

Arunthathiyar men of the 'connected village', and that of the Chakkliyar women in both cherris in relation to *coolli* work.

‘(The old men said that) people do not call us for work now because we are weak. The young men are called and we follow them to the field.<sup>23</sup> There the young ones ask the farmer and contractor not to take us - they say we spoil their money and time. This is '*maanam kedu*' (shaming) for us. It is better to simply sit in the house. Why should we go to get work only to be insulted (*kevalam*) by others? (In response to a request for elaboration I was told) when the farmer pays *mottam coolli* the farmer says nothing (about the older men being in the group) and hands over the *mottam* to the contractor who divides it between everyone there to work. The young men complain to the contractor that their money is spoilt and that they have had to make up the work that we have not done. If the farmer is paying daily *coolli* (rather than *mottam coolli*) he scolds the young men for bringing us along with them. They say "why did you bring this *kilavan* (old man) along with you - why are you wasting my money and spoiling my work? From tomorrow onwards you're not to bring him". The farmer will also tell us to our faces not to come the next day (farmers usually want people to come for two to three days). To stop us coming with them the young ones walk very fast to the field. They also call each other secretly saying (to each other) "nobody should know there is work available". If a farmer wants ten people the

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<sup>23</sup> Older women also do this - they identify which fields are being worked on that day by looking for groups of young women walking purposively towards the fields, they follow them in the hope that the farmer will give them work.

young ones will only arrange a gang of six and will tell the farmer to do *mottam* saying "we will do the work quickly, we are enough people".

At this point I described what elderly women workers said to me about the difficulties and insults they face in trying to get work and the competition with younger people, that appeared to me to be markedly similar to the ones the men described. On hearing the elderly women's experiences the old men were very animated saying the farmers and young people treat the old men in exactly the same way.

Chinnakannu's elder son responded to the older men's complaints with, "yes, we young men complain about the old ones to the farmer and contractor and yes, we secretly call young ones for work". He was laughing but he was also serious. When I said why do you do this when you will have to face being old one day he said "yes, we will have to face the problem and are willing to face it. Having to make the old men's work up one or two days is no problem but how can we make it up continuously? It is also hard work for us. The farmer takes our 'bend' (*bendu kalandruchu*) so how can we do the old people's work also?"<sup>24</sup>

The economic factors determining intergenerational relations are complex. Initially it was the supply of water which determined the divergent economic wellbeing of the Madari and Arunthathiyar generally and intergenerational relations in particular.

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<sup>24</sup> The colloquialism is equivalent to the English idiom of being worked flat out.

While being paid in kind facilitated better intergenerational relations in the initially prosperous 'remote village' it was not monetarisation and cash cropping *per se* which initiated the decline in intergenerational relations. Rather it is the combination of pressures towards expanded and more varied consumption for children and other Scheduled Caste people and the now widespread orientation towards capital accumulation and investment in progressively wider geographical areas that are the current cause of intergenerational competition for work and declining filial support. To make my point explicit the decline, which was presaged by cotton farmers divesting themselves of land to establish mills in nearby towns, is as deep as it is not only because of the commoditisation of land but because the countryside is increasingly seen by an enlarging number of people as a relatively trouble-free investment opportunity, compatible with urban and professional livelihoods. This group, along with the larger farmers, are selling products in the global market place and implementing practices that are progressively marginalising local labourers from agricultural production.<sup>25</sup> While the Arunthathiyars in the 'connected village' have seen a significant improvement in their livelihoods due to biennial irrigation, good transport links, the continuing growth of a nearby town, on-going investment in roads and the laying of cable, all, barring two or three people, can only access irregular, poorly paid, arduous work, the vast majority of which is not available to older adults.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>25</sup> Alternatives sources to agricultural work are very limited for Chakkliyors (see also Heyer 2000).

They are not given jobs in local mills

Using two examples of the position of Chakkliyors in the rural economy I have attempted to outline an argument and approach to intergenerational relations that demonstrates that these relations are not and have not been static; that relations are shaped by conceptions of personhood (and their associated needs) and by local economies. I have shown that shifts in local economies impinge on the capacity of younger generations to support the old and on the capacity of older generations to support themselves. While this situation has varied over the past one hundred years in the two villages studied, largely due to their varied endowments in water sources, the global market and state subsidies have encouraged the shedding of demand for agricultural labour, thereby undermining older people's capacity to be self-supporting and sons' capacity to support their parents. I have also demonstrated how discourses on the rights of the child and the rights of Scheduled Caste people as well as the pressure to express status through consumption (such as wearing new saris rather than second hand ones, toothpaste etc) have significantly widened the customary 'needs gap' between younger and older generations. As both custom and law position filial support as secondary to a son's need to support his marital family, if expansion in the younger generation's needs are not matched by expansion in means, this will inevitably result in increased vulnerability for the aged. In terms of future policies, as long as the perceived needs of ageing people remain both low and narrow in scope and as long as their needs are seen as less than, or secondary to, younger people's needs, older people from poorer sections of society are unlikely to benefit significantly from social and economic policies. Even if policies were implemented which directly transferred resources to ageing people the latter would come under considerable pressure to give a substantial proportion of these resources to their

sons' (and daughters') families precisely because young people's needs are considered by their families, society and older people themselves, to be greater and more urgent than the needs of the old. Consequently, it would be erroneous to conclude that it is only in rural areas or amongst the Chakkliyors that ageing parents are not receiving an adequate level of filial support, or that it is only in these areas and amongst this caste that older people are coerced into transferring resources to younger people, although class certainly deepens the difficulties sons have in supporting elderly parents. Rather, it is precisely because of the principle that younger people have greater needs that the *potential* exists for this to happen in every family, irrespective of caste and class.

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