

# Policy Watch

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*No. 10*

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## Revisiting Bogaram: Liberalisation and Caste in an Indian Village

Anil Kumar Vaddiraju



**THE HINDU CENTRE**

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Politics and Public Policy

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## ABSTRACT

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**B**ogaram, a village in present day Telangana, which is studied in this Policy Watch for the socio-economic impact of liberalisation on a rural community, was initially the subject of the author's research in 1996<sup>1</sup>. This Policy Watch is based on a revisit made to the same village in Ramannapet Mandal, Nalgonda district, Telangana State after two decades<sup>2</sup>. This Policy Watch documents the structural changes that have taken place in the village in past 21 years. The major empirical observation that emerged from the study is that the dominant caste of the village, i.e. the Padmashalis (or the traditional weavers), which was emerging as socially, economically, and politically dominant in 1996, has declined in terms of economic and social power over the past 21 years, despite the fact that they are still numerically significant caste and hold the reins of political power. The socio-economic decline of the dominant caste of weavers has happened along with the decline of their weaving occupation as a result of the decline of export markets, lack of local markets for finished cloth, and increasing prices for the raw material, and changes in weaving technology. The study concludes that this decline of the Padmashali dominant caste is in consonance with the decline and pauperisation of the entire village economy in the contemporary context of globalisation and liberalisation.

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<sup>1</sup>Telangana State was created on June 2, 2014, as India's 29<sup>th</sup> State as a result of the bifurcation of the erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>2</sup>The author first studied this village as part of his Doctoral thesis, *Capitalist Development and Agrarian Politics in Andhra Pradesh, 1960-90*, submitted to the University of Delhi. A paper based on that thesis, Emergence of Backward Castes in South Telangana: Agrarian Change and Grass Roots Politics, was published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1999.

## I. VILLAGE STUDIES IN THE ERA OF LIBERALISATION

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‘If the direction and outcome of the comprehensive process of societal transformation that is in progress are to become more understandable and tangible from a local angle, high priority should indeed be given to repeat fieldwork in villages that have earlier been the subject of social research’

Jan Breman<sup>3</sup>

**T**his Policy Watch aims to explain the social consequences of liberalisation, particularly in a rural society, by studying a village in southern India. It argues that

- a) the impact of liberalisation on different geographical regions has been uneven;
- b) this has implications for village studies; and
- c) an increased pauperisation of the rural society is the overall impact of liberalisation.

Village studies, or study of a single village, as representative of Indian villages is a well-known social anthropological/ sociological method of studying rural society. In sociological canon, indeed, the Indian village is supposed to represent the very microcosm of Indian society. The assumption underscoring this is that a village, any village in India, reflects the same social hierarchy and complexity associated with it, in a miniature form. Though urban sociology differs substantially from this, Sociologists would hold that the same ‘social’ hierarchies that characterise the village society, to some, perhaps diluted extent, still reflect in the urban context too. Thus, the study of villages is said to have two fold significance a) as a foundational study of Indian society, b) as a study of a basic unit of rural society to understand the latter.

Are village studies relevant, particularly in the context of liberalisation? Before we get into the other related aspects discussed, it is necessary to consider this question. The answer, undoubtedly, is in the affirmative. Villages, as demographic and sociological units within certain geographic boundaries, have not disappeared from the Indian cartography. It is only

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<sup>3</sup> **Breman, J. 1997.** ‘The Village in Focus’ in Jan Breman, Peter Kloos and Ashwani Saith (Eds) *The Village in Asia Revisited*, Delhi: *Oxford University Press*, pp. 15-75.

that, as this paper contends, their political economy has become more pronounced overtime than their sociological, demographic and morphological, the latter in the sense that Indian villages are organised physically in terms of caste-demarcated lanes and so on, with social hierarchy reflecting in physical organisation of a village. In that sense any village is representative of an Indian village. This is the premise on which village studies are done. However, we would like to hold that this representative character of villages is changing fast owing to uneven development of the country.

This raises another question: if the political economy of the rural society has become more pronounced overtime, should we adopt a qualitative, anthropological method or should we adopt a single or a set of quantitative methods to examine the changing nature of its political economy in the contemporary context? This author believes that even if the political economy of the rural society has become more pronounced, adopting a qualitative anthropological method, as used by the founding fathers of village studies such as M.N. Srinivas, is very important.

Let us ponder on the first question: why does the political economy of the rural society tend to overshadow the other sociological aspects such as ritual status, purity and pollution, commensality, and endogamy? This has its roots in the paradigmatic policy change introduced in the early 1990s, i.e., economic liberalisation. Liberalisation hastened the capitalist mode of development of the economy, integrated the village economy more and more to international markets thereby bringing in the adverse consequences to bear upon the entire rural society. Economic liberalisation is also said to have loosened caste ties (Panini: 1996). Whether or not economic liberalisation has come to loosen caste ties, the question of incorporation of village into the global markets and associated social consequences appears important.

Then the question is, have all these changes, post-liberalisation, been uniform across the country? The answer to this question is in the negative. The impact of liberalisation on the States and villages within them has been disparate. Similarly, the economic growth, post-liberalisation, shows variations, not only across States, but also village economies.

### Indian villages: Regional disparities and historical trajectories

One clear impact of liberalisation observed has been the widening regional disparities across the country. Not all States have grown equally, with the erstwhile regional disparities increasing further. This increasing regional disparity in the country is a direct consequence of liberalisation and the accompanying politico-economic processes. A look at the table given below makes it clear.

**Table: 1**

**Trend in Gini Coefficient\* Measuring Inter-State Inequality**

Year	Gini Coefficient
1990-91	0.171
1991-92	0.175
1992-93	0.199
1993-94	0.207
1994-95	0.214
1995-96	0.225
1996-97	0.228
1997-98	0.225

Source: Ahluwalia, M.S. (2000,2011)

*(\*Gini-coefficient is essentially a measure of economic inequality between large aggregations of populations, for example between income groups, across social classes and so on. Here it is here employed to measure the inequalities between large groups of populations that reside in separate State boundaries.)*

The above table clearly explains the *trends* in the increasing inter-State economic inequality across the country over the years. In fact regional inequality has increased and, therewith, the regional disparity and regional diversity. The increasing disparity and diversity, post-liberalisation, has certainly affected the villages differently in different regions.

Increasing regional diversity in the country has only made the classic issue of village studies, i.e. the generalisability and representativeness of villages, even more difficult. In that, a village study or set of village studies done in respect of Andhra Pradesh is no longer generalisable, say, for Uttar Pradesh, nor village studies done with respect to UP or Bihar are generalisable for, say, Karnataka or Maharashtra. This raises both the methodological and substantive questions with respect to village studies.

The question then is should we give up village studies altogether? The answer to this question is *not* in giving up village studies; rather, it is in conducting more village studies with respect to different regions and sub-regions of the country as a way of compensating for the



regional diversity as well as differential historical evolution of villages and capturing the contextual nature of their sociological and politico-economic existence.

Another important feature of liberalisation and globalisation relates to the rendering of earlier theories of two-class-two-sector models (Mitra: 1977) and 'peasant class differentiation' (Patnaik: 1987) models questionable. Either the economic differentiation in the village context has become more levelled or the sectoral and regional imbalances have become too prominent. Further, two arguments are in order: a) it is true that the village social system on the lines of '*jajmani* system' has declined (Karanth: 1996); b) social differences have become relatively less important to villagers themselves. Although castes and caste-based occupations persist, they are either getting dissolved or declining in the context of a globalisation-led overall capitalist mode of development. Concomitant with this change have been changes in the growth of nearby urban centres, casualisation of work, monetisation of all work, migration and pauperisation of villages. In this process of social and economic change, the countryside-city contradiction emerges more strongly than the internal contradictions of the village society or village communities themselves.

### **The Indian Village Today: Unity and Diversity**

Amidst all the diversity, are there some common sociological characteristics for a village to be called a sociological unit? The *varna-jati* system continues to be the basis of the village as a social organisation. However, as Karanth (1996) has pointed out earlier, today, castes exist independently, not as part of the village 'social system'. The systemic character of the village has nearly disappeared universally. What we find instead is the existence of castes and caste-based occupations separated in different degrees from one another and, at the same time, incorporated into the modern market economy. The modern market economy only cares for skills of the workers, not the sociological background of their skills.

Also the same castes in different parts of the country exist in different degrees of conflict, accommodation and coexistence. Pai (2012) notes at least three types of regions where different degrees of challenge, conflict or accommodation have come to take place in India: the Dravidian South, the Ambedkarite West and the Gandhian North, she notes, have witnessed challenge, conflict and accommodation within the castes in various degrees. However, there are also further divergences apart from these three patterns; there are areas that do not fit into the framework developed by Pai (Pai:2012); for example, contemporary Telangana.

## II. VILLAGES AND STATE PRESENCE

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Contemporary Telangana historically evolved out of the Nizam rule and later, post-Independence and liberation from Nizam's rule, supported by different national and regional parties. Often in the context of Telangana the major axis of political mobilisation of lower castes has been class rather than caste. Therefore, at the village level, mobilisation along caste lines has been at various degrees of inertia. Historically, none of the three major movements that shaped socio-political discourses in different regions of India - Ambedkarite, Dravidian, or even Gandhian - had a strong base in the region. The communist movement which had evolved in the region was able to mobilise the subaltern castes more in the language of class rather than caste. Thus, here we clearly see the absence of an explicit caste-consciousness.

What is pertinent to be noted here is that the presence of the state in the local arena has been rather insignificant. The development works, land reforms and the populist programmes of different parties and governments put together have not laid a basis for a strong presence of the state at the local level. In other words, what we find in respect of Telangana villages is a fair level of indifference on the part of the state towards a change for the better. The impact of all the programmes and schemes put together does not amount to much as far as the presence of the state is concerned for the local communities. Thus, the proximate face of the state mechanism, be it by way of panchayats, or by way of revenue administration, does not amount to much. What we see instead is the indifference on the part of the state towards the local communities unless something extraordinary takes place. This is particularly true after the formation of the Telangana State. During the study, there was no evidence of any significant changes brought about by the new Telangana government in the lives of the local communities. The village under consideration continues to be neglected, as also most of the villages in Telangana. Rather, the new Telangana government has been high on promises, much like many other previous governments with no likelihood of at least some of the promises being fulfilled in the near future. Therefore, we do not see a significant presence of the state at the local level. This is certainly true so far as the local welfare provision is concerned. An account of a brief revisit made to a village called Bogaram in Telangana presented in the next chapter reveals traces the evolution of the dominant caste, the condition of the Dalits today, and explains these changes.

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### III. BOGARAM: THE DESCENT OF THE PADMASHALIS

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**B**efore coming to the village study presented below, we need to take a look at the macro context at the state-level within which the village is situated. Presently, the village Bogaram falls in the Telangana State. However, prior to the formation of the State on June 2, 2014, after a protracted struggle, the village was part of the united Andhra Pradesh. What is of specific importance to note is that the (united) State of Andhra Pradesh has been at the forefront of economic reform and neo-liberal governance reforms since their introduction at the national level. These were first introduced by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government led by Chandrababu Naidu and have since continued. The TDP government that introduced these reforms was defeated in the elections to the State Legislative Assembly in 2004. The main reason for this lies in a complete neglect of the agricultural sector and the economy of the countryside since 1997. The reforms led to an agrarian distress with reports by suicides by farmers and weavers. The TDP government which initiated reform has also been criticised for these reforms and the successive governments in Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana (after the division of the State), have been following the same policies of economic reforms to attract private capital. The main issue is that these reforms have been largely urban-centric or, to be more specific, ‘Hyderabad-centric’ and have failed to improve the condition of farmers or of people practising their caste-based occupations: one such example is that of weaving. Thus, this village study needs to be contextualised within a pervasive rural crisis in Andhra Pradesh/Telangana. This rural crisis, which is basically an economic crisis, has resulted in the pauperisation of agriculture,<sup>4</sup> (Suri: 2006) with the rural people moving away from traditional caste-based occupations into casual labour. This also has resulted in indebtedness of the farmers and those engaged in other rural occupations. This crisis has affected the weaving sector too and, therefore, the village Bogaram that we discuss below falls in the context of the rural crisis—which is broader than agrarian crisis—affecting all the social groups of the village, including those who are not engaged in agriculture. Bogaram village comes under Ramannapet Mandal of Nalgonda district in Telangana. This village was studied by the author in 1996 as part of his field work for his Ph D thesis. Part of the study was

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<sup>4</sup> Suri, K. C. 2006. “Political Economy of Agrarian Distress”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 22, Vol. 41, Issue. 16.

subsequently published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*<sup>5</sup>. The main observations of that study were:

The dominant caste in Bogaram were the Padmashali weavers. To be called a 'dominant caste', in M.N. Srinivas' terms, it fulfilled two criteria: one, it was a numerically preponderant caste; two, at the time of the study, the Padmashali caste was also politically ascendant in local elections, besides acquiring land. M.N. Srinivas defined the dominant caste in the following terms:

‘A caste may said to be “dominant” when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low’. (Srinivas, 1996:54-55)

The Padmashali caste of Bogaram was not, however, the dominant land owning caste. In fact, it only started acquiring land in 1996; despite this it fulfilled the remaining two criteria of being a dominant caste. The Padmashalis are a backward caste according to official records.

The main argument at the time of our research in 1996 was that the erstwhile dominant caste, the Reddy Patels, who were dominant in the local power relations, land ownership and caste status, had declined owing to the 'emergence of backward castes'. Now, however, we would argue that the then-emergent dominant caste, the Padmashali weavers, have not actually consolidated their gains, and although they remain numerically preponderant, constituting nearly 50 per cent of the village population and holding control over the local panchayat, they have, however, declined in respect of economic power. The argument is that their ascendance earlier was owing to their growing economic power in the village. This has received a blow with the decline in export of woven cloth and emergence of mechanisation as a new process, following the introduction of power-looms. We argue that the investment in power looms could only be done by a few from among the weavers who, at the time of the re-study, were found owning one or two power-looms per house, because they could afford to buy them.

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<sup>5</sup> “Emergence of Backward Castes in South Telangana: Agrarian Change and Grass Roots Politics”, Special Article, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34 (7), February 13-19, 1999 pp. 425-430. ISSN: 0012-9976. Subsequently an abridged version was published in a volume edited by Professor Surinder Singh Jodhka (Jodhka, 2012: 181-192)

A majority of the weavers have become wage labourers in view of the increasing presence of the power-looms or have left the village. From a village of 300 families of weavers, the numerical strength has come down to 100 families. Also, when it comes to wages, we find that agricultural wages far exceed the wages for weaving workers. Thus, in this paper, we argue that a second tectonic change has taken place so far as the village social structure is concerned. Now even the weaving caste finds itself on a decline with no winner being around this time. The case we are trying to make here is that post-liberalisation, there is a pauperisation of the entire village in stark contrast to the growth taking place in nearby towns and cities.

The 1996 study pointed out that the weaving occupation had become lucrative around the 1980s with premium quality cotton cloth produced in the village being exported to even overseas markets in Eurasia, Japan and other countries. This internationalisation of the weaving occupation (as noted in the 1996-study) had resulted in a certain social stratification among the Padmashalis. While the master-weavers continued to dominate the village, the two lower rungs of weavers were those engaged in weaving of cloth and those engaged in wage labour in the weaving occupation.

Master-weavers were only supplying the raw materials and marketing the finished cloth produced by the two lower rungs of weavers. Caste-wise, master-weavers and handloom weavers were all Padmashalis. However, the wage-worker-weavers were, sometimes, from the other castes of the village as well.

The introduction of liberalisation in the early 1990s, however, as mentioned in the study, started working against the above process. As early as 1996, the strains being exerted on the weaving occupation had become obvious with increases in prices of yarn, colours and dye etc (being used as raw materials), and declines in the market for the finished cloth. I have noted this phenomenon earlier as below:

‘For weaving, things have changed since roughly about 1990. Prices of yarn, chemicals and other raw materials have doubled, while the price of the finished cloth exported has remained unchanged. The burden is transferred by the master weavers to the two lower rungs of weavers. This is done by cutting down the wage rates and/or piece rates. Thus, it is the wage workers who bear the burden of internationalisation.’ (Vaddiraju, 2012:186-187).

In the following section, I intend to present the apparent changes that have taken place since 1996. The total population of Bogaram stands at about 1,800, while the total number of voters comes to 1,475. Of this population, 50 per cent are Padmashalis or weavers and the rest of the population belongs to the other castes. The other castes include Reddys, Gollas or Yadavas (shepherds), Gouds or toddy tappers, Dalits, and a marginal presence of the washermen and barber castes. There was one Brahmin family in the village in 1996, but it left the village thereafter. There are about 100 weaver families. Bogaram from being a village of handlooms with every weaver household owning one or two handlooms has transformed itself into a village of a few power-looms and many wage working weavers over a period of two decades between 1996 and 2016. Only those who could invest in power-looms have purchased the same with a single power-loom costing about Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 60,000; the double power-loom cost about Rs. 1,00,000 to Rs. 1,50,000. Not all the weavers have been able to shift from handlooms (*chenetamoggalu* in Telugu) to power-looms. In a village of about 300 hand-looms, the present power-looms amount to about 60 to 70. About 50 weaving families who own these 60 to 70 power-looms (some families have more than one power-loom) employ the remaining weaver families as wage labourers in the weaving process.

Presently, there are two types of wage labour work in weaving: one, warping work for which the wage, on an average for a two-person family amounts to about Rs. 200 per day; second, colouring work for which a weaving family of two earns about Rs. 300 per day. Weaving is often a caste and family occupation wherein all the members of the family work: men and women together. These two processes—warping and colouring—require separate skills and are done separately.

This process of transition is a major change observed in this village. In the place of prosperous employment-generating handlooms, we witness mechanisation and, more importantly, proletarianisation of the weaving community. Increasing number of weavers work as labourers for wages lower than the prevailing local agricultural wages.<sup>6</sup>

One major disturbing development that can be brought to the attention of the reader is that between 1996 and 2017, 200 weaver families have left the occupation and even migrated out of the village. There were now barely 100 families living in dilapidated houses. Some have

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<sup>6</sup> This is quite reminiscent of Marx's words about the origins of manufacture and proletarianisation. Marx at one point in *Das Kapital* says 'Manufacture (at) first establishes itself not in the cities but in the countryside in villages etc. The rural subsidiary occupations contain the broad basis of manufacture' (cited in Vaddiraju, 2013:12-13).

built *pucca* houses, but still do wage work. In 1996, two-to-three truckloads of finished handloom cloth was exported from the village. Now, one small auto-truck carries the entire village produce per week. The exact reasons and policies underlying this transformation and pauperisation appear complex. According to some weavers, up to 1998 the handloom-weaving activity flourished well. There was a steady decline thereafter and now, the entire weaving activity is caught up in deep crisis. The crisis has gone to such levels that during 2010 to 2014, at least six weavers from this village committed suicide; the victims included a woman as well. This is only a reflection of the crisis prevailing in handloom sector.

Those weavers who have left their handlooms behind and migrated to Hyderabad mostly to work in the informal sector are occupied in myriad kind of jobs; they have set up petty shops, tea stalls, work as security guards, as salesmen in medical shops and the likes. Most of them do not have education enough to be absorbed into the formal urban economy. The average education of the weavers is 12<sup>th</sup> standard. In rare cases some have a graduate degree, but that is often of no avail in securing jobs in the formal economy. Those weavers who migrated did so with their immediate families. They left behind their older parents who still somehow make a living out of handlooms/wage-based work. The monthly wages of these migrant weavers range between Rs.10,000 and Rs. 12,000 a month in the city, whereas they find it enormously difficult to earn even that amount in the village engaged in their traditional handloom weaving profession. Hence, the migration.

One reason reported for this change is that *chenetamoggalu* (handlooms) require physical strength to operate. Since Bogaram village falls under a fluoride-affected region with the drinking water containing hazardous levels of fluoride, the health of many handloom weavers got affected forcing them either to adopt power-looms or to leave the profession. Here, it is interesting to note that the entire Ramannapet region is affected by fluoride in drinking water. This affects health and causes orthopaedic disorders. However, this is only a partial explanation for the transformation that has taken place. The major reasons for the crisis in the handloom sector lie in the changing macro policies and the political economy of the weaving sector. Another possible reason for this is that most of the educated youth among the weaving community do not intend to take up rural caste-based occupation; instead, they prefer urban-based work and, therefore, migrate to cities for whatever work they can find.

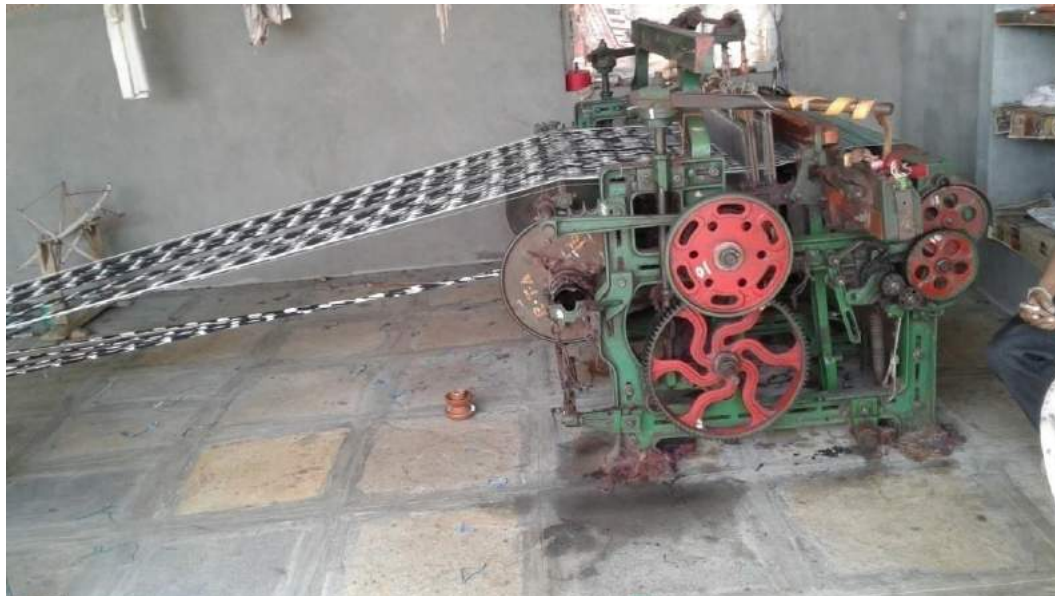
**Table-2: Transition from hand looms to power looms**

1996	300 handlooms (owned by 200 families)
2017	60 to 70 power looms (50 families of weavers own these. Remaining 50 families work as wage working weavers)

**Source:** Based on data derived from author's fieldwork



1: A weaver standing beside a power loom



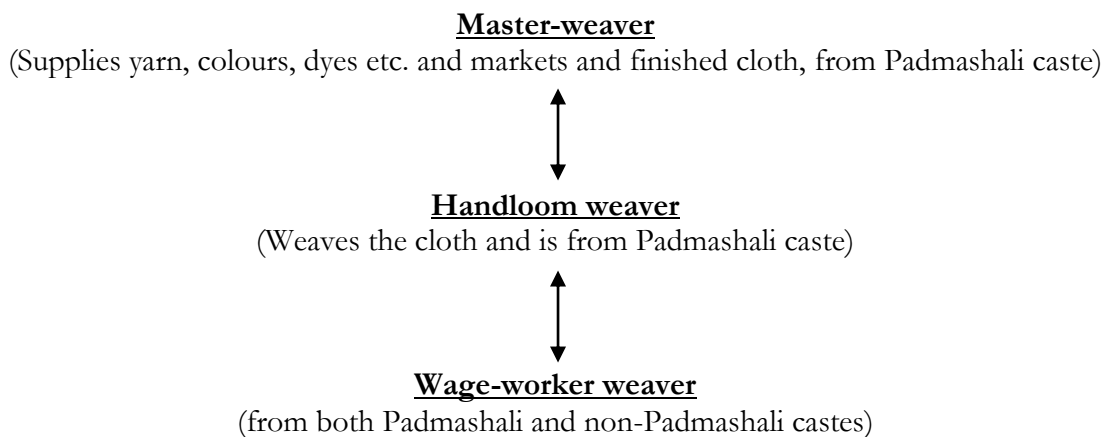
2: A newly installed power loom



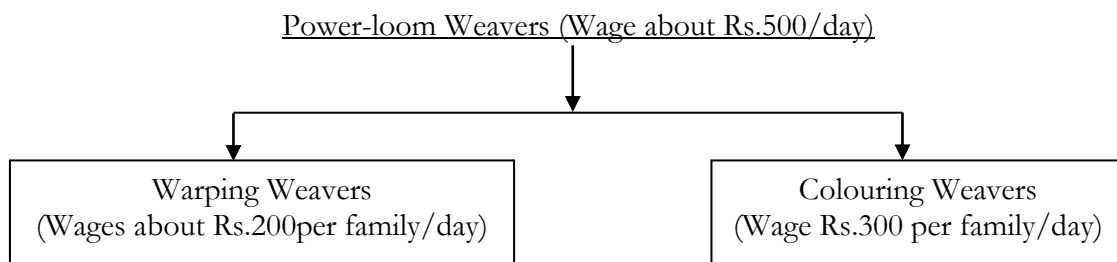
The social hierarchy or the emergent stratification among the weavers, as we had explained earlier, is described in the following Diagram-1. Here, in 1996, the master-weavers supplied the yarn, colours and other requisite raw material to what were then only handlooms, besides marketing the finished cloth. They gave near wage prices to the handloom weavers skimming off the surplus from weaving. However, we argued that given the magnitude of the handloom activity then, every section of the weavers benefited monetarily from the process. This process, we argued, benefitted the master-weavers more than the other weaving sections and, in the process, enriched the master- weavers unevenly.<sup>7</sup>

However, by 2017, the entire class of master-weavers had disappeared with no one to supply the raw materials and to market the finished cloth. The master-weavers also worked as exporters and with export markets going down, there was none to care for the marketing of the cloth produced. Now handloom and power-loom workers directly take the cloth to a place called Pochampally for selling their product at the wholesale market. The earlier class structure within the weavers that we had described in 1996 is as below:

**Diagram-1: The stratification among weavers of Bogaram in 1996**



**Diagram -2: The stratified division of labour among the weavers at present**



<sup>7</sup> M.N. Srinivas at one point says about caste-class relationship, ‘Not only will class divisions exist within castes, but each class itself will be composed by diverse castes some castes being more strongly represented in a class than others’ (Srinivas, 1996: xiv-xv).

### **Agri Wages Higher Than Weaving**

There is no major change in the physical conditions of agricultural production. Agriculture is still carried on with bullocks and plough. There is no significant mechanisation of the agricultural activities observed, with tractor-ownership in the entire village not exceeding two. There has been no major change in the agrarian structure ever since we first visited the village in 1996. The Reddy caste households still happen to be the major land owners though with a proviso. That is to say, the size holdings of these families have dwindled with the division of families and consequently land holdings. As we have already noted earlier, by 1996, practices such as *vetti* (bonded labour) had completely disappeared as also the *jeeta* (annual attached farm servant) system. Now, no landowner prefers to have a *jeeta* or an attached farm-servant as the wages for the same are very high, according to them. The prevailing agricultural wages are higher than wages in the weaving occupation. Agricultural wage per male worker per day is around Rs. 350 to Rs. 400 while for female wage workers, it is about Rs. 200 to Rs. 250. There are 20 Reddy families who are agriculturists. Each family owns about 10 to 11 acres. There are 75 Yadava families who are mainly sheep grazers and small farmers. There are about 30 families of toddy tappers or Gouds and 20 families of washermen. Endogamy, that is marriages within the caste, is still the norm in the village.

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## IV. DALITS AND THE ABSENCE OF SOCIAL REFORMS

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**B**efore we proceed to discuss the condition of Dalits, it is important to note that Telangana State has never witnessed the same kind of Dalit mobilisation and consciousness as in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, or Uttar Pradesh (UP). Therefore, all three frameworks of understanding Dalit consciousness i.e. Dravidian, Ambedkarite and Gandhian (Pai: 2012), fail to explain the condition of Dalits in Telangana in general, and in this village in particular. We have not observed the kind of Dalit mobilisation in this village as described by Pai (2012). We do not even see such a level of consciousness among Dalits and consequent antagonism and confrontation with upper castes. The situation is largely inert if at all one were to go by the macro level descriptions provided by Pai (2012). Besides, Telangana, historically, had also not witnessed social reform or caste reform movements on the lines of those of Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, or Ramaswamy Naicker in Tamil Nadu, nor did it have a strong Gandhian movement. In fact the historical legacy of social reform can be of great importance and relevance to all sections of society, including Dalits. This absence of a history of social reforms and any historical memory of the same is glaringly obvious in Telangana. Instead, Telangana has the historical memory of the peasant armed struggle against the Nizam led by the Left movement in the late 40s and 50s. However, the influence of the Left has since drastically declined owing to various reasons. Currently, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] has a small presence in the village mobilising some votes in the elections but it is no longer a formidable force.

A small *pucca* cement road near the bus stop within the village leads to the Dalit families. There are about 50 families of Dalits, of which 48 families belong to the *Madiga* sub-caste and two families to *Mala* sub-caste. These constitute 200-250 voters. There are about 50 male educated Dalit youths in the village who have completed graduation but they have not succeeded in finding jobs in the formal sector. On being asked as to why they did not find work in the formal sector with education up to graduation and the support of affirmative action, the youth replied that wherever they looked for jobs, they were being asked for skill training. Both private and public sector jobs demanded, apart from general graduate degrees, a specific training in skills, the youth are generally not equipped with it. Since they have not undergone skill training, they are being denied jobs and hence, they work as skilled labourers, e.g. masons.

**REVISITING BOGARAM:  
LIBERALISATION AND CASTE IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE**

The village also boasts of an Ambedkar youth association which was established and registered in 2002. At an interaction during the revisit, the secretary of the Ambedkar Youth Association said that there was no practice of untouchability observed in the village. Among the 50 Dalit families, none followed its caste occupation of leather work or any such practices. Only one Dalit person from the entire community is still engaged in the leather work. There are six Dalit families of marginal farmers with each owning about two to four acres. The remaining 44 families are agricultural labourers. In the entire village, there were only two *jeetas*, or attached farm labourers, the system almost having disappeared in the rest of the village. There is complete casualisation of labour. A majority of the labourers are engaged in daily wage work (what is called *roju coolie* in Telugu). This is liberating in the sense that the wage labourers do not have any obligation or bondage or extra-economic coercion at work place.

There is only one visible improvement observed as much for Dalits as in the rest of the village. The agricultural wages have improved from 1996 to 2017.

Depending upon the season, the male wage-rate is from Rs 350 to Rs. 500, whereas, the female wage-rate is about half of that (Rs. 200 to Rs. 300) per day. How much of this is translated into the improvement of real wages is for economists to tell. This is also a reason why the erstwhile handloom weavers now prefer agricultural wage work to weaving with handlooms. Both, however, do not enjoy the same social status and, more importantly, this is an obvious case of proletarianisation of half of the village households that come from weaving background and other castes.

No major caste-conflicts are reported in the village. I enquired particularly about conflicts between the upper castes and Dalits and between backward castes and Dalits. However, according to the Dalits interviewed, no such incidents have taken place so far. As a Dalit woman observed in a discussion, “The upper castes now come a step down to treat us well. And we treat them well too.”

When asked about the activities of the Ambedkar Youth Association, the secretary of the association explained that it periodically conducted sports and cultural activities for the youth of the village. On being asked whether they felt there is a difference between the youth of the association and the rest of the village, he explained, “The association youth do not see any difference. And, moreover, the rest of the youth too cooperate in these cultural and sports activities and the relations between the youth of different castes are harmonious.” Obviously this is a very different situation from the one elaborated by Pai (2012) in respect

of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and UP. When asked as for which political party the Dalits voted, they said that they all voted for the TRS (Telangana Rashtra Samiti) despite the presence of many other political parties in the village.

### **The Village Panchayat**

When I first visited this village in 1996, the elections to the Gram Panchayat had just got over with clear majority for backward castes in the entire Mandal of Ramannapet. This was after the introduction of the affirmative action in Panchayats. The same trend has continued since then. The current Sarpanch of the village is a woman from the Padmashali caste. However, when asked about the village panchayat, Shivaranjani, refused to speak and said that we should contact her husband instead, Balram. For every question that we have tried to ask, her standard answer was, “Ask Balram sir. He will tell you.” It appeared clearly a case of proxy presidentship in the Panchayat. Although women among Padmashalis take the full load of their occupation and share as much burden of weaving as the male members do, when it comes to holding a public office perhaps they are still somewhat hesitant. Interestingly, the Sarpanch and her husband belong to *Telugu Desam Party* (TDP).

## V. CONCLUSION

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The village discussed here, Bogaram, is essentially weaver-caste dominated village. The crisis in sector has crippled the village inhabitants and have forced them to migrate, mostly to Hyderabad. Weaving, as it comes out from our in-depth interviews, is affected by increasing prices of yarn and colours and the lack of markets for finished cloth. The government of Telangana was supposed to have announced 45 per cent subsidy on yarn prices. However, this promise remained only at the announcement stage. The subsidy has never reached the weavers. The crisis in weaving sector has long been brewing. Initially from the late 1980s to 1996, there were export markets for handloom cloth. Later, however, the exports declined. While we do not know the exact macro policy reasons for this, the weavers themselves tell us that the exports of handloom cloth have been subsequently banned by the government at the Centre. Simultaneously, the domestic markets declined because of the high price of the handloom cloth when compared to the mill produced cloth. Increase in the prices of raw materials has pushed up the price of the finished handloom cloth which is uncompetitive when compared to the cloth produced in cotton mills. Most of the weavers sell their finished cloth to the wholesalers in the famous town of Pochampally (known for handloom cottons and silks). A quick visit to Pochampally and interviews with the weaver's cooperative there tells us that there is now a glut of handlooms unsold in the market. This is because while the exports have not been revived, the domestic markets are dominated by the mill produced cotton cloth.

All these have resulted in outward migration from Bogaram and, at a few extreme circumstances, suicides of the weavers. It is interesting to note that the State has done very little other than providing some ex gratia to the victims of suicides. There were practically no steps to prevent the crisis in livelihoods and the resultant migration. Not even the fluoride problem is solved. The Hindustan Petroleum Company started a drinking water purification

plant in the village out of its Corporate Social Responsibility funds in 2014. The company sells purified water at the rate of Rs.3 per 20 litres and the villagers are left with barely any alternative. The much awaited water from Mission Bhageeratha (a centralised drinking water provision scheme for entire Telangana) has not materialised so far.

Another reason why the weavers and farmers cannot cope with the post-liberalisation scenario is the lack of education. Most weavers are educated only up to Matriculation or intermediate and they cannot find formal sector jobs with this education. The government has not even provided a High School for this village. There is only one secondary or what is called Upper Primary School (UPS) in Bogaram and the education it imparts hardly enables them to go beyond.

The village does not have a hospital or a PHC (Public Health Centre). The villagers are forced to commute to Ramannapet PHC which is three km away or private hospitals in the same city, for medical care. There is, of course, a private medical practitioner in the village who provides initial care, but this is grossly inadequate for a population of 1,800. These are the reasons why, as stated above, the presence of the State does not amount to much for the villagers, especially in the context of their well-being. They have no hospital, no drinking water, no high school and no attempts by the State to curb migration by enhancing livelihood opportunities. The indifference of the state machinery is rather stark as reflected by the villagers during the field visits.

This paper has argued that studying villages of India post-liberalisation is fraught with difficulties. Besides the question of generalisability of village studies, there is also the question of increasing regional disparities in the country that makes the generalisation of single village studies even more difficult. We have also argued that what has happened since liberalisation is largely the pauperisation of major sections of the village, including the backward castes and their occupations. On the one hand, the *jajmani* system—a system of reciprocal support between different castes in kind and services to each other and to land owners—has disappeared; traditional caste occupations are on the decline—whether or not they have been replaced by any other. On the other hand, what is taking place is increasing pauperisation, proletarianisation and migration of major sections of the village populations. In this context, following Ambedkar's argument, we should actually be celebrating the decline of this 'sink of localism... and communalism'. That indeed is the paradox that Marx had noted of proletarianisation. That is, those who become proletarians in the new places are liberated from erstwhile bondages, in our case the loosening of caste occupations and ties,

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but on the other side, they become slaves of new circumstances. The debate between Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar about the Indian village is well known. In the current scenario, however, it is Marx and the political economy that is enormously behind the decline of villages. We have tried to demonstrate, based on the Bogaram study, that the trend is towards a gradual decline of the village both as a social unit and an economic unit. Those who take the Gandhian approach to studying villages may regret this, while those who take an Ambedkarite approach may find comfort in this truth.



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## VI. WHAT CAN BE DONE: SOME POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING WEAVING

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In the light of the revisit study of we may suggest the following policy measures:

1. The most urgent need is that of the reduction of the prices of the raw materials that go into weaving. The prices of the yarn, chemical and colours have to be decreased. A 45 per cent subsidy on yarn, as announced by the Telangana and Union governments, should be implemented.
2. There have to be channels by the Telangana government and its weavers' body, TESCO (Telangana State Weavers' Cooperative Society), to purchase the finished fabric from weavers and market the same elsewhere. This has to be done immediately and effectively.
3. The five per cent GST imposed on the handloom cloth should be removed. The GST only adds to the price of the final cloth in the market and makes sale of the same uncompetitive.
4. There have to be policies towards health insurance for weavers and general insurance for weaving families at subsidised rates. These did exist earlier during the United Progressive Alliance regime at the Centre which have to be revived.
5. Policies towards the weaving sector suffer from tokenism. Traditionally, the Budget speeches of both the Union and the State governments make a mention of the sector and the allocations for the corresponding fiscal year, but nothing happens thereafter. This 'policy-tokenism' should be done away with and proper implementation of the promises made in the budgets, allocations and schemes should be done.
6. Flourine in drinking water is a public health hazard and calls for a speedy, effective and leak proof implementation of drinking water policies in the villages.
7. Finally, in the wake of liberalisation and the havoc it has caused to the livelihoods of the village caste-occupations and handloom weavers, we not only need an economic policy but a robust social policy (in terms of public health and education) for villages in general and the weaving sector in particular.

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