

## Livelihood Insecurity and Coping Strategies of Handloom Weavers: A Comparative Study

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**ABSTRACT** Suicides of handloom weavers drew lot of attention from various sectors in recent years. But the phenomenon is not uniform in all the weaving centres. There is no evidence of suicides in certain places despite the insecurity in earning livelihood. The root cause for suicides of handloom weavers is the development of mill sector and the failure of handloom weavers to compete with it. It is believed that the successful coping mechanisms have played a crucial role in avoiding livelihood crisis and suicides. At this juncture, it is very important to evaluate coping strategies and their impact on the livelihood of weavers. The paper tries to explore the similarities and differences in the coping strategies of two castes of weavers and try to understand their consequences.

### INTRODUCTION

The occupational association of the caste has continued to be the key characteristic of Indian society. Klass (1998) opines "Endogamy is a primary distinguishing characteristic or attribute of castes and that commonality of occupation is the next most important." All the persons practicing same occupation need not belong to a single caste. However, the occupational specialization has been considered as an advantageous character and a system of perfect division of labour by some scholars. This system has ensured an occupation for every individual of the society. These are known as traditional occupations. Handloom weaving is one among such occupations practised by specific castes of people in different parts of India. The handloom sector occupies a distinct and unique place in the Indian economy. It is the largest generator of non-farm rural employment. India is the highest handloom producing country in the world. As Seemanthini and Soumya (2001) reported, it is providing employment to 12.4 million people and thus stands next to agriculture. Out of this, 60 percent are women, 12 percent SC (Scheduled Castes) and 20 percent ST

(Scheduled Tribes) with 38.91 lakh handlooms in India. In the present industrial scenario, weaving activity has undergone many technological changes that divided it into three components. They are handloom, powerloom, and mill/industry. Handloom is the largest employer among these three sectors. It is a very important industry among small scale and cottage industries of the country. It has a strategic position in the socio-economic structure of the country due to its nature of work, and employability.

The weaving castes have undergone a transformation with the changes in the technology of making fabric. Colonial legacy reduced the share of handlooms in the production of cloth. The Marxist school of thought has argued that colonial contact destroyed pre-existing industrial systems and brought about economic retardation. Marx (1853) observes: "It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning-wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindostan, and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons." The independence could not be able to give an opportunity to retain the lost share of handlooms. Janardhan (1977) quoted the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was very clear about the future of handlooms in the era of industrialization. He felt that handloom weavers couldn't survive if they didn't change according to the changes in the industrialization. He has emphasized on the need of adopting occupations other than traditional occupation.

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The handloom sector was recognized as potential employer by the Government of India and was given due importance along with agriculture in the first five-year plan. The Cotton Textile (control) Order that prohibits certain varieties from manufacturing by mills was issued during this period. 'Karve Committee' was appointed to look into the problems of handloom industry. 'Sivaraman Committee' was appointed during the fourth five-year plan to study the problems in handloom industry. The 20-point Economic Programme of 1975 emphasized on the development and extension of handloom co-operatives, intensive development outside co-operatives, and setting up of export-oriented pilot production centres. Srinivasulu (1996) opined that the major breakthrough in the handloom industry after independence is the announcement of the textile policy of 1985. It has reserved 22 varieties of fabric for handloom weavers and allowed mills to produce all other types of fabric. Noorbasha (1996) opined that the policy has failed miserably in achieving its objectives. The new economic reforms further led to degeneration of the handloom industry and have caused large-scale de-employment of weavers. It was the rate of production that dominated rather than amount of employment generation. As a result of drastic consequences, the Government of India has appointed 'Abid Hussain Committee' during the seventh five-year plan to study the situation in handloom sector after 1985 textile policy. The textile policy of 2000 further decreased the number of items to 11 from the reserved category of handloom industry. As a result, handloom weavers failed to compete in variety or cost with the mill-made products.

### Background

The consequences of handloom crisis are worse in many weaving centres of Andhra Pradesh. In recent years it has occupied an important place in the discussions of politicians, social activists, media, and scholars. The weavers from popular weaving centres such as Siricilla and Dubbaka have experienced the worst face of the crisis. Their shift from handloom to power-loom led to a diversity of problems. For example, high interest rates, hike in power tariffs, hike in the prices of raw materials, competition from mills, unfavourable tex-

tile policies of the government etc. The power-loomers have started producing huge quantities of fabric and drastically affected the handloom sector. For example, the tie and dye *Pochampalli sari* costs 280 rupees when it is produced on handloom whereas it costs 60 rupees if it is produced on power-loom. It has led to the disappearance of market for handloom products. In majority of the cases, few members of the family have shifted from handloom to power-loom and other members have been left with nothing. The women are the primary victims of this shift. It has led to the deterioration of the financial condition of the family. The weavers have become dependent on the government or banks to invest huge amounts on power-loomers. But it hasn't yielded profits to them. Therefore, they were totally immersed in debts.

The weaver produces cloth as a marketable commodity without having skills in the production of raw material. The availability of raw material and its cost has become volatile with the changes in quantity of production, policies of government, and development of mill sector. *Frontline* (April 14-27, 2001) reported 43 cases of suicides in the power-loom town of Siricilla, Karimnagar district in one year during 2000-2001. They have also reported 20 cases of suicides in the handloom centre of Dubbaka in Medak District in the four years from 1997-2001. According to the estimates of weaver's co-operative societies, *Infochange* (March, 2003) reported 300-400 suicides of weavers from Andhra Pradesh in 2001. *Central Chronicle* (April 23, 2008) reported that since 2000, Andhra Pradesh has seen around 650 suicides and starvation deaths in weaver families. The persistent indebtedness was identified as the important cause for all suicides. But, the causes of suicides are not purely economical; the social co-relates are equally important. For example, indebtedness involves a serious loss of prestige in the community. Health problems, ceremonies such as marriage, puberty, and festivals etc., add to their misery. The weavers have failed to cope up with the financial needs of social life and have thus resorted to suicide.

An entirely different situation is observed in Ponduru village of Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh, India. The weavers of this village have been suffering from similar kind of problems. The yarn prices, competition from mills, imitation of handloom products by mills, marketing

problems, low wages, and defunct co-operative societies are similar in nature in all the weaving centres. But no suicide has been reported from this village. What makes Ponduru weavers different from the weavers of other weaving centres? An important question that needs to be addressed. Therefore, the study was conducted among the handloom weavers of this village. Ponduru village is a *mandal* headquarter and a major *panchayat*. It is considered as one of the important weaving centres in Andhra Pradesh. There are 21 castes and one scheduled tribal group inhabiting this village with a population of 12,284. Among them, *Pattusali*, *Devanga*, and *Padmasali* are handloom weavers. *Padmasali* numbered only 4 families and they are not the original inhabitants of the village. The study was conducted among *Pattusali* and *Devanga* castes. There are approximately 380 families of *Devanga* and 420 families of *Pattusali* living in the village. *Pattusalis* are having a superior social status than *Devanga*. They are vegetarians. Their men wear a sacred thread. They do not weave during the pollution period. For example, they do not weave for 11 days in case of the death of a family member. It is three days in case of kin member and one day in case of clan member. Their women do not participate in weaving for 3 to 5 days during menstrual period. They weave silk and fine varieties of fabric. *Brahmins*, a superior priestly caste serve as priests for them. *Devangas* are non-vegetarians. Their men do not wear sacred thread. They observe pollution only for one day except in case of the death of family member. Their women participate in weaving during menstrual period. They weave coarse varieties of fabric. *Jangams*, an inferior priestly caste serve as their priests. The fabric woven by *Pattusali* is preferable for ritual purposes. The groups with higher economic status are the clients of *Pattusali* whereas the groups with low economic status are the clients of *Devanga*. The *Pattusalis* are sharing common streets with the dominant (numerically, politically, and economically) *Nagavamsam* caste. But *Devangas* do not share any common street with either *Pattusali* or *Nagavamsam*. In fact, *Devangas* live at the end of the village. The handloom weavers of Ponduru village have been subjected to changes since the establishment of trading centres by East India Company in coastal Andhra region. The company has established

two textile factories in this region. It has led to the creation of new category of weavers in the late eighteenth century known as 'company weavers'. Swarnalatha (1991) reported, "In 1802, there were 6 looms employed at Ingeram factory and 8 looms were employed at Maddepollam factory from Pondooro (Ponduru)." It has gradually led to the destruction of handloom industry in this region.

The problems being faced by the handloom industry came to be first emphasized in 1928 by the Royal Commission on Agriculture. Kanakalata and Syamasundari (2001) quoted the report which expressed the view, "the development of this village industry on co-operative lines was essential to the survival of weavers in the face of increased competition from organized industry." As a result, many weavers' co-operative societies were established in the country. *Saibaba Weavers Co-operative Society* (SWCS) was established in 1942 by the weavers of *Devanga* caste of Ponduru village. *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham* (AFKKS) was established by *Pattusali* weavers in 1949. Both the societies have faced many challenges in the course of time. They have failed to satisfy the aspirations of handloom weavers. The organization of production has undergone certain changes through time. The most significant was the emergence of an intermediary class of trade-financiers (master weavers) mediating between the producer and the market. They have a significant impact on the weaving activity of Ponduru village. The handloom industry of Ponduru village can be divided into three sectors on the basis of organization of production. They are, independent weavers, co-operative, and master-weaver sectors. *Independent weavers* are those who produce cloth on their own, that is, they own the instruments of production, purchase raw materials from market and produce fabric with family labour and sell the products in the local market or to traders. The stiff competition from the power-loom sector, rising prices of cotton hank yarn and dyes, lack of capital, and market risks have been quite drastic on these weavers. *Co-operative weavers* are those who organise as a society and work for it. The handloom co-operatives are a major segment accounting for a large proportion of weavers. But, they have seen a decline since the 1980s due to increased political and governmental interference. The ineffectiveness of the co-operatives in ensuring

regular supply of the raw materials and the delays in the payment of wages forced the weaver for a shift into the master-weaver system. In the *master-weaver sector*, the entrepreneur controls the production by giving wages to the weaver who produces cloth. With the decline of independent weavers and the marginalisation of the co-operative sector, it has emerged as the dominant system. Monopolization of production by master-weavers made it as an exploitative system. The master-weaver decides the amount of production, type of product, time of production and the wage to the weaver. Nothing is in the hands of a weaver who is the actual producer. Even though, the loom belongs to the weaver; he accepts the ownership of his master over his loom and the master-weaver claims the same. According to the weavers of Ponduru, master-weavers are 'necessary evils'.

### The Problem

Handloom weaving enjoyed its glory and experienced fall in India. It was understood as a way of life rather than an occupation that merely provides livelihood. It was subjected to drastic changes in the course of time. Its fall started with the advent of British to India, their imports, and mechanisation programme. The handloom weavers failed to compete with powerlooms and mills. As a result, they have tried to adopt occupations other than handloom weaving. They have gradually adjusted in new occupations with few exceptions. They have adopted different types of coping mechanisms along with occupational diversification in order to overcome the crisis. In this context, an attempt is made to understand the coping strategies and their consequences on *Pattusali* and *Devanga* weavers of Ponduru village, Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh, India.

### Objectives

- To examine livelihood problems of handloom weavers.
- To analyse coping strategies of handloom weavers.
- To compare two castes of handloom weavers with reference to social and economic co-relates of livelihood insecurity and coping strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

The field village was selected after a careful examination of situations at different weaving centres of Andhra Pradesh. Ponduru is a weaving centre with significant population of weavers without any report of suicides. The weavers of *Pattusali* and *Devanga* castes are engaged in different sectors within handloom weaving. It was helpful to compare the coping strategies and their consequences. The fieldwork was conducted for a period of 65 days. The meetings were held with heads of co-operative societies (*Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham* and *Saibaba Weavers Co-operative Society*), associations and elders for the selection of sample. The random sampling method has been used for the study in order to administer the schedules. There are 138 *Pattusali* households and 189 *Devanga* households selected for study. They represent a population of 551 *Pattusalis* and 903 *Devangas*. Schedules were administered for the household survey. Apart from this, the tools and techniques like social mapping, observation, key informant interviews, and group discussions were conducted to collect required information. The 'secondary sources' such as literature, gazetteers, newspapers and magazines, reports of governmental committees have been used to understand the history, dynamics, economic conditions, occupational and social changes, and coping mechanisms of handloom weavers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are differences in the intensity and type of coping mechanisms adopted by both the castes. It is reflected in diverting their skills and labour to other beneficial occupations. The differences are prominent in educational development. This has contributed to the differences in the response of both the castes at individual and group level.

### *Pattusali* Caste

The weavers of *Pattusali* caste have responded immediately for the crisis in handloom industry. Occupational diversification is the very important coping strategy for them. They haven't left handloom weaving while adopting a new occupation. They have left it in a gradual process of change. The occupational diversifi-

cation is predominant among men. Spinning continue to be the major occupation for women. Table 1 shows the occupational distribution among *Pattusalis*. The percentages are calculated against a total workforce of 345 men and women. Their alternate occupations range from an ordinary labourer to a qualified engineer. They have also entered into entrepreneurial activities and monopolised the local business. As a result, they have got better access to education and other assets. It helps in changing their status in occupational and social hierarchy of the village. Gradually, they were able to spread into many other occupations. They have adopted *chutta* (black cigar) making as the subsidiary occupation. Francis (1907) describes the occupational shift of *Pattusali* weavers in the *Madras District Gazetteers: Vizagapatam* (1907). According to that, "round Chipurupalli, for example, the Pattu Salçs have become expert in tobacco curing, and have made such profits that they are able to monopolise much of the trade and money-lending of the locality." Even after hundred years, they continue weaving, spinning, and cigar making. The involvement of entire family in handloom weaving has extended to cigar making. The men will go out of the home for the marketing of cigars. It has become an important business in the course of time. The other major areas of business include wholesale and retail shops, garment shops, electronics, pharmacy, fruit stalls, sweet stalls etc. 'Teaching' has emerged as an important occupation. Majority of the teachers are working in government schools. Working as government teachers further enhanced their status.

**Table 1: Occupational distribution in Pattusali**

Occupation	No. of practitioners	Percentage (%)
Spinning	91	26.4
Weaving	13	3.8
Cigar making	48	13.9
Labour	22	6.4
Industrial worker	21	6.1
Teacher	40	11.6
Engineer	9	2.6
Business	52	15.1
Clerical jobs	18	5.2
Other	30	8.8

Note: The percentages are calculated against the total workforce in the caste, that is, 345.

The labourers include household labourers, construction labourers, and labour in a local

mills. Most of the factory workers are at a better level (as skilled low level white-collar employees) when compared with their counterparts in *Devanga* caste (semi-skilled blue-collar employees) because they possess better educational qualifications. There are 9 engineers and 10 others are currently pursuing engineering course. It reflects the kind of development. The category of 'other' constitutes a wide variety of occupations like nurse, Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM), tailors, mechanics in motor vehicle repairing work sheds, cooking master, agents for financiers, and workers in *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham* etc. Adoption of multiple occupations is a very important coping strategy. For example, the same person is involved in business and weaving or cigar making and business etc. Different members of the household are involved in various occupations. The person in white-collar occupation is also involving in business during free time. Unlike in handloom weaving, the earnings of different members of the household from different occupations helped them to acquire assets like house plots, houses, cultivable land etc. Such kind of acquisition also helped in the development of social assets. They have established relations with dominant caste of the village. They have gradually acquired the political power and elected for the positions like village *Sarpanch* and ward members. The higher political status served them as a tool to cope with the crisis. It was helped them to mobilize the resources, access the means of credit (loans from banks), and advertise their business activities.

They have preferred to move into other occupations instead of adapting of new technologies. This is because of lack of profit even with the new technologies. But the minor changes are accepted. For example, *belani* (an apparatus made with iron and wood is useful to clean and soften the seedless cotton) replaced two old pieces of apparatus such as *nidupu dukka* (wooden block useful in softening the raw cotton), and *ekilu* (bow shaped apparatus useful to cleanse the seedless cotton). It has reduced the labour of a spinner. The spinning machine provided by the *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham* increased the production of yarn. It has also established the work-shed for women spinners. Some of the poor families from the *Pattusali* caste are working in the shed. Educational development is another important

response to the problems in handloom weaving. The literacy rate is significantly high. There are 32 percent male and 10 percent female graduates. Hence, they are able to move into wide variety of white-collar occupations.

Apart from the individual's response, some coping mechanisms are adopted at group level. The social networks are very important as an effective coping mechanism. Sorokin (1959) opines that the social networks of the individual members or the membership of a person in his group helps him in the movement, either upward or downward. It is true in this case. They have developed good communication within the caste. They have efficient caste and occupational associations. All the members of the caste are the members in *Pattusali Sangham* (caste association) and all the weavers and spinners are the members in *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham*. These associations are acting as supporting agents during the crisis. *Pattusali Sangham* has started giving credit to its members at a low interest rate. They are also supplying textbooks and notebooks to the children of poor families within the caste. The funds are mobilized from the well-established members of the caste. The *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham* is giving scholarship of 1200 rupees per year to the intermediate students of poor families. Shaw (1977) rightly opines "if the group is to function effectively, its members must be able to communicate easily and efficiently." It is witnessed in the elections of *Andhra Fine Khadi Karmikabhivruddhi Sangham*, where all the directors elected unanimously. They have developed good relations with the people of other castes. They have also started eliminating certain practices like untouchability and social distance with the lower castes. Giving credit to the person of any caste is a major step in this direction.

### **Devanga Caste**

Responses of *Devanga* caste are delayed. Unlike *Pattusali*, they have adopted alternative livelihood strategies after experiencing problems for a long time in handloom weaving. Their initial response is not towards the development of alternate occupations. Instead, they have entered into other sectors within handloom weaving. For example, there is a shift from coarse cotton

weaving to fine cotton and silk weaving. This has not had a significant impact except for a small increase in the wages but has served as a temporary relief. Partial occupational shift is an important and effective response to livelihood crisis. This is of two types. The first type is partial movement of an individual from the traditional occupation by developing a subsidiary occupation, and the other is the movement of a few members of family to a different occupation. The second type of shift is more prevalent. The earnings of one or the other member of family supplement the poor wages in the traditional occupation. The change of loom is another strategy of *Devanga* weavers. There are two types of looms. They are *Anchu Muggam* (useful to weave fabric with designs) and *Sada Muggam* (useful to weave plain fabric). Three people are required to work on *Anchu Muggam* whereas two are enough to work on *Sada Muggam*. Many weavers have switched over to *Sada Muggam* because of the scarcity for labour.

The poor performance of the *Saibaba Weavers Co-operative Society* has led to the movement of weavers from co-operative sector to master weaver-sector. Despite poor wages, the continuous work and immediate payments have attracted them. The advances given by master-weavers during festivals have helped them in avoiding debts. They have started mixing different varieties of thread in the making of fabric. This is a kind of cheating, but an outcome of crisis. In this method, they use yarn of different combinations for *padugu* (warp) and *peka* (weft). They mix fine yarn with coarse yarn while making the fabric. For example, they use 100s and 80s or 80s and 60s or 60s and 40s or 40s and 20s counts respectively as *padugu* (warp) and *peka* (weft) in combinations. The highest count (100s) is finer and costlier and the lowest count (20s) is coarser and cheaper. It yields some profit to the weaver. Technological adaption is confined to the usage of flying shuttle in case of *Sada Muggam*. The poverty of weavers and inefficient supporting agencies are responsible for lack of up-gradation in the technology. But, they were trained to weave new designs and varieties of fabric. The training has been provided by various agencies including central government, state government, and master-weavers. It helps the weavers to upgrade their skills. They were producing 12 types of designs

prior to 1985. But, now they are producing 54 types of designs with minor variations with the intervention of a master-weaver.

Table 2 shows the occupational diversification in *Devanga* caste. The percentages are calculated against the total workforce of 592 men and women. The occupational diversification is confined to men whereas women are either continuing in handloom weaving and spinning or opted out of it. Majority of the industrial workers (10 percent out of 14 percent) are of 20-30 years age group. Most of these workers are wage labourers and getting an average of 70-100 rupees per 8 hours of work. But the family of a weaver (with at least 3 working members) gets 90-110 rupees for 12 hours of work. Hence, the members of *Devanga* community usually compare the wages of a weaver with that of an industrial worker. As a result, they search for ways and means to get employment in the jute mills, rock crushing and brick-making industries of the village. The labourers are mainly working in hotels, cloth shops, and in building/construction etc. The businessmen include master weavers, cloth merchants, small tea stall owners, and street vendors. The engineers are the kin of master-weavers. The category of 'other' includes doctor, office assistants, tailors, and salesmen.

**Table 2: Occupational distribution in Devanga caste**

Occupation	No. of practitioners	Percentage (%)
Spinning	22	3.7
Weaving	398	67.2
Labour	36	6.1
Industrial worker	84	14.2
Teacher	10	1.7
Engineer	3	0.5
Business	22	3.5
Other	17	2.9

*Note:* The percentages are calculated against the total workforce in the caste, that is, 592.

From Table 2, it can be understood that 27.3 percent of the total working population have shifted to different occupations. They are below 40 years of age. It shows that the occupational shift is a recent phenomenon. The occupational status is determined by the amount of earnings rather than the required or possessed skills. Therefore, the semi-skilled or unskilled industrial worker is placed in a better position in the occupational hierarchy. However, the poor earn-

ings in handloom weaving played an important role in conceptualising every other occupation as superior to handloom weaving. There are very few white-collar job holders in this caste due to lack of educational development. The levels of education are very poor. Among the male members, 17 percent are illiterate and 33 percent educated up to primary level. There are 11.4 percent graduates and 2.3 percent post-graduates. The case of women is worse. There are 42 percent illiterates, 28 percent educated up to primary level, 3.3 percent graduates, and 0.2 percent post-graduates (only one). But the increasing awareness and growing educational levels of present generation helped them to divert their attention to other beneficial occupations.

They have lower status in political hierarchy. The main reasons are lack of numerical strength, awareness, and assets. As a result, they have less access to the schemes of government. They continue to be precariously located in getting the livelihoods. Unlike *Pattusali*, there is poor response from the associations of *Devanga*. *Devanga Sangham* (caste association) and *Sri Sri Sri Kasivisweswara Sangham* (association based on religious sect) are not very active agents in dealing with the problems of *Devanga* weavers. *Devanga Sangham* is active during elections and *Sri Sri Sri Kasivisweswara Sangham* is active during festivals. But these organizations serve as meeting places for their members to exchange opinions. *Devanga* weavers are divided on the lines of co-operative weavers, weavers working under a master-weaver, and independent weavers. They use to support respective master-weaver at the time of elections to *Saibaba Weavers Co-operative Society* or at any other event. It is a major obstacle to work as a group. But they have maintained an effective communication within the sub-group. Particularly, the weavers who are working under master-weavers received help at the time of need. There is a gradual spread of their networks with the recent occupational changes. For example, the teachers of *Devanga* caste have extended their network beyond the boundaries of caste. Now, the poor weaver is able to access credit from the teacher or other well-placed person of the same caste. Development of jute, rock crushing, and brick-making industries in the village during the late 1980's and early 1990's helped

them to get some kind of employment. Moreover, these industries did not demand any higher education. These industries played a crucial role by providing work for 18 percent of *Devangas*.

### CONCLUSION

Every caste or group tries to develop coping mechanisms when it encounters problems in existing occupation. In fact, every person devises an alternate strategy based on his/her capabilities and accessibility to resources. But the earning of a decent livelihood depends upon the success or failure of such mechanisms. The successful coping strategies will help to avoid the problems but the failure may lead to livelihood insecurity. The success or failure depends on the nature and type of coping strategies. The social environment with opportunities is very important. The interaction within a social group and with other social groups is equally important in this regard. It can enhance the abilities of a group to mobilize and organize the resources in an efficient way. It further depends on the economic and political status of a caste or a group. A successful coping strategy needs to address all these linkages. The coping strategies of Ponduru weavers addressed all these linkages and proved successful. But, there are certain similarities and differences among the weavers of *Pattusali* and *Devanga* castes. The differences pertaining to the occupational shift, acquisition of assets, and educational levels are prominent. However, they have proved as time-bound and minimized in long run.

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