

LEARNING FROM THE GRASSROOTS

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When I visited villages in Adilabad, I learnt that the Indian samaaj was very different from what I had learnt about Indian society through a Westernised education. I learnt that the larger part of rural Indian society is made up of closely inter-connected producer communities, who though they do not socialise with each other are professionally interdependent. My companions and I learnt about the traditions of village life from Ravindra Sharma of Kala Ashram. We found that Government interventions in local cotton textile production tended to centralize the process and to break traditional relationships among producers. We based our own interventions on our learning.

I began spending time in the villages of Adilabad in middle age. I came from an urban, English language-educated background, and my Macaulayan education had taught me that India had a strictly enforced vertical ‘caste system’. Higher castes at the top, lower ones at the bottom, like a ladder. This was in the late years of the 20th century, and the ‘development paradigm’ insisted that rural areas were backward and needed to be ‘developed’. Intuitively, I rejected that idea. I came to village India as a learner, as one who searches for one’s own lost heritage.

Nobody had told me that 90% of the Indian *samaaj*¹ was made up of producer *jatis*² with strong lateral, non-hierarchic relations among themselves. Nothing in my education had prepared me for the sophisticated technologies meshed seamlessly with society, for the ability of *jatis* to move in and out of occupations as circumstances changed, for the many and complex roles and interdependencies among them; the pride and self-esteem of the so-called ‘lower’ castes, even of those whom modern society calls ‘beggars’. This was, as I said, the closing years of the last century. Between the villages there were *kuchcha*³ roads and occasional, usually official, motorized traffic but no buses yet. The dense forests had gone half a century before and taken the tigers with them. The traditions of village life remained, just so.

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¹The word translates as ‘society’ in Hindi.

² Communities. The word is translated primarily as ‘caste’, see C.J. Fuller, *Caste*, in *THE OXFORD INDIA COMPANION TO SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 477, 477 (Veena Das ed., 2003).

³ A Hindi word describing unsurfaced or untarred roads.

We were a diverse group: two young IIT graduates and me, a middle-aged, middle-class housewife. In common, we had a huge thirst for the real Indian *samaaj*. Outside that context we felt we ourselves could not be real, we were only cardboard figures with artificial wants and desires. Strangers were few in the remote villages, and we were regarded with suspicion. “Which kulam?”⁴ was a frequent question. ‘*Tirrigin’orlu*’,⁵ we would reply, wanderers. As we gradually meshed into the local textile making we made an identity for ourselves not as part of the *samaaj* but as familiar outsiders.

Ravindra Sharma was our teacher. A maverick child in his conventional Brahmin Punjabi family who had settled here a generation before as caterers to the Railways, he rebelled against family dress conventions of shirts and trousers and at the age of 8 adopted the *dhobi*⁶ instead. He would spend hours with the *Nakashis*⁷ learning their painting techniques, on his return submitting to ritual purification by his grandmother before being allowed to enter his house. Against the family’s wishes he studied sculpture and won a scholarship to the Baroda School of Fine Arts. Selling his sculptures earned him a substantial sum and he returned to Adilabad to set up the Kala Ashram with his old *Nakashi* teacher, now blind, as its presiding deity.

Sharmaji who had earned the title ‘Guruji’ as a joke when he led an *akbari*⁸ of martial arts companions in his teens, has immersed himself in the folk arts of the region. He has spent days in the forest with parrot-catchers and attended 10 day wedding celebrations of the *Mathuria*. He learnt the local techniques of pigment painting, pottery and the different metal casting techniques of the *Ohtaris* and the *Ojha*. In these 10 years as an art teacher at the tribal school he taught *Kolam* boys first how to draw, then to paint, to model in *matti*⁹ and later to cast metal, to express their own unique inner world.

We spent hours and days listening to Sharmaji’s recreation of the past. The village day was defined by the visits of the *sanchar jatis*,¹⁰ the itinerants, beginning before daybreak with the

⁴ ‘*Kulam*’ roughly translates as ‘community’.

⁵ ‘*Tirrigin’orlu*’ is a term we made up, which means ‘Wanderers’ in Telugu.

⁶ An Indian traditional men’s garment, made of unstitched cloth.

⁷ A local wooden figure-carving and -painting community.

⁸ A group of trained individuals, specifically of the martial arts.

⁹ A term meaning ‘clay’.

¹⁰ An umbrella term for nomadic communities; the term *sanchar* means ‘travel’ or ‘wandering’.

budubudukalodu,¹¹ whose songs drove away evil spirits, the *balasantodu* with conch and bell, and the *gosamolu*,¹² a husband and wife playing an *ektara*.¹³ There were people with skills such as water diving, general entertainers and educators, and story-tellers of particular communities, and the *bbikshavruthi*,¹⁴ who were each attached to a specific *jati* as oral historians for that *jati*, and were supported by their patrons. Each community, the weavers, the potters, the *Manevarlu*,¹⁵ the *Golla*¹⁶ shepherds, its own story-tellers who trace the history of the *jati* back to link it up to *Puranic* times, and each story is told with the help of a *patt*,¹⁷ and sometimes also with separate painted wooden figures. These histories connect the past to the present in a continuous thread. The weaving caste of the *Padmasalis* traces its origins through *Markandeya* to *Bhavanarushi*,¹⁸ their deity, clothes-maker to the gods. From these beginnings the stories are updated to today, and tell where the current generation of *Padmasalis* has migrated to, who has married whom, and the names of the newborn children. This relationship between the story tellers and the weavers amplifies the role of *bbiksha*¹⁹ in our *samaaj*, far from the pattern of dependency and condescension connoted by the words “begging” and “beggars”.

Sharmaji opened the curtain for us on the coherent, cohesive world of the close-knit community of artisan producers, service providers, artists and technologists that made up a society rich in myth and imagination, where each community was distinctive and separate, and each had its place. Though they would not eat together, each provided one particular special skill on which others depended.

The *Ojha* are brass casters. They make wax wire from beeswax, to be coated in mud and heated in charcoal, the wax replaced by molten brass to make the votive lamps they traditionally made for the *Gond* people. Their casting technique is different from that of *dhokra*, the better known brass casting of Madhya Pradesh, and both are different and more economical, more

¹¹ Name of a community.

¹² These are all names local communities identify themselves by.

¹³ Single stringed musical instrument.

¹⁴ The so-called ‘beggar’ communities.

¹⁵ The name of a local community.

¹⁶ The name of a shepherd community of Andhra Pradesh.

¹⁷ A painted scroll that illustrates and records the story, and with the help of which it is told.

¹⁸ Characters, sometimes deified, in the Indian *puranas*.

¹⁹ The term *bbiksha* means ‘begging’, and refers primarily to monks begging for alms.

ecologically sound, than the European 'cire perdue'²⁰ process. Small groups of *Ojba* lived in the *Gond* villages they served, but the Government in its misplaced benevolence brought them together in their own settlement in ugly cement block houses, thus breaking the relationship between them and their traditional customers. The *Ojba* are now dependent on urban sales through the government handicraft agency, and the votive lamps have lost their significance to become tourist trivia.

Mandabechu are the historians of the *Golla* shepherds of that region. The *Golla* are paid to pasture their flocks in farmers' fields; the sheeps' dung is as valuable as their wool. They believe that listening to the tales of the *Mandabechu* will increase their flock, and so the shepherds pay and look after the story tellers and will gather round the fires each night to listen to their stories. The *Mandabechu* use a *patt*, a painted scroll of their particular story, with painted wooden figures of the deities and characters. The *patt* and figures are made for them by *Nakashis* to whom the *Mandabechu* will bring their old, damaged and smoke-blackened *patts* and figures to be repaired and repainted. Today these paintings and figures are available in urban craft shops in Hyderabad.

Shadow puppets made of translucent leather entertained the traditional village with *Puranic* tales. The puppet-makers used deer skin in earlier days, cow skin now. The puppets are painted and pierced and a light is held behind them to cast coloured shadows on a curtain. The puppet-makers are also the performers, singing the stories and playing musical instruments with their feet. Reduced to begging after cinema came to the villages, the puppeteers now make a precarious living selling their puppets as decorations.

To begin with we thought that such change is inevitable as an outcome of progress. But then, thinking a little more deeply we began to wonder: must modernity necessarily rid life of its diversity, must it iron out into boring sameness the rich and complex texture of traditional life? Once we had this thought we looked for clues to the factors that made change happen, particularly in local cotton textile production.

We made friends with the *Padmasali* and *Devangula* of the villages around Chinnur. Both are traditional weaving castes, and in this region the *Padmasalis* wove cotton while the others wove

²⁰ Lost-wax casting: the process by which brass or bronze casts are made from the original.

tassar.²¹ Everywhere we went we would ask how things had been in the past. The picture that emerged has changed for ever my way of thinking about progress and development, and the relation of tradition to modernity. I realized that progress is not linear from tradition to modernity, that both co-exist in time and space. I learnt that directions of progress are not inevitable natural processes. There is no one inevitable modernity; it is a complex of choices made by individuals who make up society.

This is what we learnt of the story of textile-making in Adilabad: Until the Second World War cotton was grown here for local use as well as for export. Most of it was traditional Indian varieties, *Omra* and *Gaurani*, which needed no irrigation and very little manure. The cotton was short or medium staple, used locally to weave sturdy long-lasting clothes and household linen. In 1937, the local handspun yarn was valued at Rs. 12,000/-. Because all the weaving was of plain stuff from local yarn for local use, Adilabad did not gain a reputation as a weaving centre.

In Bhimavaram village the fifty or so weaving families still have memories of using the yarn imported from England before the Second World War. Now none of them weave. The war stopped the yarn and they took to farm work. In Kollur, Vollala Rajam and his brother Shankar are the only two members of the extended family still weaving. Their uncles and cousins in Maharashtra and Karimnagar are masons or anything but weavers; another brother farms. Rajam says that fifteen years ago the weaving charges for one sari were sixteen rupees which bought four *kunche* of *jowari*, the equivalent of fifty kilos. He remembers when customers used to come and order all the household cloth needs for a bride, and how when this trousseau was ready it was taken by the customer from the weaver with gifts and ceremonies.

Here in Kollur as all over Andhra and Telangana it was the women of non-weaving families who spun yarn, as a leisure activity. Cotton was bought from neighbouring farmers. The Reddy women of Kollur used to buy it from Devulapalli in Maharastra, and can do it now, except that now the farmer grows American cotton. Women gathered in twos and threes with their *charkehas*²² in the courtyards of their houses to spin and chat. The carding was done by itinerant carders, the *dhunakkaras*. In the days before the *kbadi sangams*, the weavers visited the houses and took orders for

²¹ A kind of silk, made from the cocoon of the *tassar* moth.

²² Roughly translates in Hindi as 'spinning wheel'.

cloth in exchange for the yarn. This casual and easy interchange was one of the crucial points of contact in the cloth making chain. It took place in thousands of homes between women of different communities and local weavers and provided, with no managerial, clerical or accounting interference, the vital yarn for weaving.

The move to collect handloom weavers into cooperatives was begun by the State with the best of intentions to protect weavers from unscrupulous traders. When the Chinnur society was formed in 1958, it had a thousand weaver members, weaving on pit looms in their own homes. The new Society began well by supplying them with mill-spun yarn for cloth which the weavers sold as they had done before, to local customers. That spelt the end of local hand-spinning. Then a weaving shed was built in Chinnur and frame looms installed, and yarn supply restricted only to the weavers who wove in the shed. This put an end to village weaving. Once the weavers moved to Chinnur, the nature of the industry changed from one of dispersed household production, serving local needs, to a centralized industry.

The output of the frame loom is much higher than that of a pit loom. The beam holds a warp of 200 metres, which means that a large quantity of one kind of cloth will be made at a time. It needs a lot of working capital to buy all that amount of yarn at once. So much cloth of one kind in one place needs accounting, clerical, managerial and sales staff. And so the whole superstructure is built up, of offices and shops and people, all supported by the only productive work that goes on: the work of the weaver.

When we came to Chinnur the number of weavers in the area had been declining steadily, from our estimate of thirty thousand families at the time of independence, to a hundred or so by 1989. The critical local links between cotton growing, yarn making and the local market were gone. We took up a government supported project with six weavers, providing them frame looms in their own homes. So began our lesson in the nature of technology and the small-small everyday choices that guide the direction of technology development.

Right away in setting up the looms some of the drawbacks of the frame loom became apparent. It needed parts like the steel reed and plastic bobbins which were not available locally. The reed came from the Imperial Textile Industries, Surat; the bobbins from Bombay. There is

only one dealer for these in the whole of the Karimnagar and Adilabad area, serving territory larger than Kerala. We had to wait three months for bobbins which for a pit loom would be made from bits of *jowari* stalk.

As soon as the cloth started coming off the looms, a great mismatch of frame looms and local marketing was shown up. The beam of a frame loom takes a much longer warp than the pit loom, 200 metres to the pit-loom's 35. Until one beam is completed the weaver cannot make anything else, he cannot change from towels, to *saris* for example, and it takes him about a month to weave 200 metres. This means that weavers cannot be responsive to customers' immediate needs, they cannot weave to small individual orders. Mass production of one thing rather than a variety makes local sales a burden. Most importantly, centralisation of technologies breaks the intricate professional relationships that have provided the framework of our indigenous industrial culture for millennia.

How we dealt with these problems is the key to our involvement in cotton textile production ever since. In the 20 years since our first lessons from the grassroots, we have involved the new generation of *Padmasali* in weaving. We have introduced natural dyeing in Chinnur, and taken technology in a different direction, one that will make and not break local relationships, that will remake the broken links between cotton farmers, yarn spinning and hand-weaving. But that is a different story.