

MADIGA: FATHER OF LEATHER TANNING IN INDIA

GATTIGUNDE VENKAIAH

Assistant Professor
Department Of History,
SR & BGNR Government Degree College (A)
Khammam, Telangana
gattigunde.venkaiah@gmail.com

Abstract:

Reporting on the leather work of Madigas from any period is scarce, but this essential aspect of Madiga's history requires notice. It has been a major root of their distinctive identity and of their importance for the society they have served. These leather workers had a crucial role to play in the agrarian economy in the past. They took away the carcasses of the cattle, removed the skins and tanned the hides in the traditional fashion. They mainly manufacture the native foot wear. The leather workers rendered the services on a par with the other artisans like blacksmiths, carpenters and goldsmiths in the society and later they are gradually looked down in the society as they disposing of the dead animals. They were the only caste, who carried tanning as their occupation from the past, but now the whole leather industry is under control of capitalists and upper castes.

Keywords: Madiga, carcasses, carpenter, leather worker, tanning

Introduction:

"He (Madiga) was a leather worker. He cured skins and made shoes. He also fed upon carrion. No carcass came amiss to him, no matter how it died. The skin for shoes and the flesh for food was his dictum. Moreover, he was the drummer at festivals".

- Coyler Sackett, an Anglican

missionary

The traditional leather technology of Madiga community is an important element in the Indian culture. It is not only helped for the economic development of the people but also contributed for the enrichment of the socio-cultural life of the people since ancient times.

Madigas, as represented here by Jambava, a first ancestor, are a large central caste in the constellation and they have other small 'satellite castes', sometimes regarded as sub-castes, and attached to them. Apart from Madigas in villages collecting cattle carcasses, tanning the skins to make leather and then producing items of everyday local use from it, other castes of the constellation specialised in tanning, in high quality manufacturing of particular articles - with the repair of footwear so familiar in the recent past as a generally available fall back - and in the trading of skins, leather and finished products. The importance of leather and the secure livelihoods to be obtained from it meant that even leather workers based in villages might support satellite castes operating over wider areas, amongst them the Chindus and other performing castes to be noted.

The caste myth (*kulapuranam*) here is focused on Jambava, or often Jambavamuni, the ancestral Madiga, and is generally termed the Jambava Purana. Such myths and their hereditary tellers are well known by and for many castes in Telangana. Madigas are distinctive here only in having several different groups owning and telling their own versions of the caste myth in their own ways.

Leather tanning and manufacturing of leather goods were specialized skills and were recognized as significant crafts in ancient India. The widespread leather working communities of Southern parts of India are known with various regional names as evident in the ethnographical data of the colonial period. They are called Madigas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Mochi and Samagara in Karnataka, Tolkollans in Kerala and Chakkiliyans and Vettiyanas in Tamilnadu, whereas Chamars in Northern parts of India. They have a highly evolved social structure and are divided into specific professional groups along with their dependent communities like Chindu, Dakkali, Masti, Gosani and Machala communities in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Like all castes in India, today they generally believe in prestigious origins. One such theory speculates that Madiga is derived from Sanskrit word Maha- Adiga which can be loosely translated as great and older. Accordingly they sometimes call themselves as Arundhathiyar based on myth of Madiga, Vashista marrying a daughter of a Madiga sage named Arundhati. This myth is also used by other castes called Chakkaliyans in Andhra and Tamilnadu to call them as Arunthathiyas. There may be ethnic and linguistic relations with Mang in Maharashtra the Chakkaliyans in Tamil Nadu and possibly the Matang in North India.

The endogamous groups of the Madiga in districts of Telangana are:

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| 1. Sambari Madiga | 5. Dokkali Madiga | 9. Gosangi or Gosika Madiga |
| 2. Jingari or Zingar Madiga | 6. Manne Madiga | |
| 3. Pinchini Madiga | 7. Areti Madiga | |
| 4. Dhore Madiga | 8. Tangeti Madiga. | |

Thangedi or Tega Madiga and Gosangi Madiga are found in large numbers in these districts also¹. The Tangedi Madiga takes their name from a plant called *Thangedi*, the bark of which is used in tanning hides. The Madiga use this plant in their traditional occupation and a section of the caste is known by it. The clean caste people have a different version. According to them a *Thangedi* plant is always crooked, and one needs considerable effort to make it straight; a *Tangedi Madiga* too is never straight forward and needs considerable pressure to mend his habits. The plant has to be beaten hard with a stick for removing its bark, and only after a good deal of beating it becomes useful for burning; in the same way a *Tangedi Madiga* will not work properly unless he is punished every now and then. The Tangedi are found in almost all the villages of Medak district. In some villages they are also called *Tega Madiga* because they work as village menials².

Perhaps, these leather workers were deemed to be unclean and untouchable on account of their beef eating habit, working on the forbidden leather and their supposed unhygienic life style. It is, perhaps, due to the assumption that they are working on the hides of the cows considered sacred in Hinduism. Though they were considered as a part of mainstream of Hinduism, they were neither given a respectable position nor allowed to visit their sacred places or given ritual participation. As such, they were forced to live in the hamlets outside the village at a distance from the so-called caste people. These leather workers had a crucial role to play in the agrarian economy in the past. They took away the carcasses of the cattle, removed the skins and tanned the hides in the traditional fashion. They mainly manufacture the native foot wear. Their other manufactured products include sheaths of the swords and knives, harness for the cattle including leather collars, ornamental fringes

for the bull's forehead, drum-heads, tom-toms and bellows for the smith and small boxes for the Barber to carry his razors. They supplied implements needed for agriculture to the agrarian communities.

History of Tanning and Leather Making:

In recorded history of the world, pieces of leather dating from 1300 B.C. have been found in Egypt. Primitive societies in Europe, Asia and North America all developed the technique of turning skins into leather goods independently of one another. The Greeks were using leather garments in the age of the Homeric heroes (about 1200 B.C.), and the use of leather later spread throughout the Roman Empire. During the middle ages, the Chinese knew the art of making leather. The Indians of North America also had developed great skills in leather work before the coming of the white man.

'Charmakara' the word was derived from 'Charma (hide)', which is common expression in Vedic literature from Rig- veda onwards. Hide, particularly, Ox-hide had many uses, such as the making of bowstrings, slings, lash of whip bags. The art of tanning leather was known from Rig- veda, which uses the word 'Charmanna' meaning a tanner. A detailed process of the tanning is not known, but a Satapada- Brahmana's passage indicates that hides were kept stretched with pegs and the Rig- veda mentioned the wetting of the hide shoes (sandals) which were also used. From the Satapada- Brahmana, it appears that boar skin was one of the material from which shoe were made³.

According to Basava Puranam, the episode sets up a dangerous relationship between Jambava and the cow. The story now brings him into relation with the key source of the leather, dead cattle, indeed with the skinning of the dead Kamadhenu. It is framed in a way which avoids any implication that this in itself is other than a valued skill. From this, Madiga moving in the forest, Parvati was injured herself and blood from the wound became a tree and at its foot, a boy, Chennaiah, was born. Perspective, the impending problem lies elsewhere, and blame will be firmly attached to a non-Madiga. Parvati and her husband were the implication of his birth is that he is the child of Parvati, and quasi kinship with Jambava is established too. The gods (*devata*) told Chennaiah to address Jambava, 'born six months before the birth of the earth', as grandfather (*tata*). Chennaiah is first taken back with Parvati to Kailasam, Shiva's abode, to be the keeper there for Kamadhenu. He, however, forms a desire to taste her meat, at which she dies of sorrow in front of Lord Shiva. The gods are not up to the task of removing and cleaning the body. Chennaiah is therefore sent to fetch Jambava from his own place where he is sitting, high up and engaged in the worship of lingams, the symbol of Shiva. Chennaiah means to call him: 'Grandfather, come down!' but instead mispronounces the intention, saying instead 'Grandfather Madiga comes!'

The disturbance has caused him to lose his lingams and to be called 'Madiga'. He descends, interpreting events as the working of the curse of his Dakkali son. He opens his treasures and hands on to his Chindu son, Jihmamuni, a bell which Adishakti had given him. It is a conspicuous ornament worn by the Chindu playing Jambava in Gosangi Vesham. His Chindu son is to come twice a year to the houses of the Madigas to receive his dues. Jambava and Chennaiah return to Kailasam where he and the gods cut up the carcass. Chennaiah is to cook it for eating, but in the course of the cooking a piece falls from the pot. He picks it up, blows on it to clean it and pops it back. The offence is that he has polluted it with his breath

and the gods reject it and they said, 'it is for Jambava and his grandson'. By implication, the gods are ceasing to eat beef as polluted and it is to be for those cursed with untouchability only, but the restriction is linked to the polluting of food, not to the sacredness of the living cow or danger from the dead one. Pollution as a phenomenon is not denied, but any understanding of the cow in its death as intrinsically dangerous is turned aside. In it Madigas will continue to deal with the successors to Kamadhenu as it die, and they will continue to have the beef to eat but will be regarded as polluted for doing so; and they will be provided with paddy and other means to life by those growing it. They will have a livelihood but its cost in pollution and status loss is not disguised.

The impending end of the last age before the present age of ultimate degeneration, Kaliyugam, is signalled. The gods will withdraw, leaving him, says Jambava, helpless in the bad place to which they had summoned him. He begs from them the boon of the provision for his Madigas of paddy and other foods. He lists thirteen kinds of residue from harvesting and threshing, as well as other items that people are to give them annually. Thus the final element in the relationship of untouchability for the present age is set up.

The art of tanning was known as early as Rig- vedic culture of Indian history. The Satapada- Brahmana also gives information about the process of tanning and leather shoes and other goods made of leather. Though the leather workers rendered the services on a par with the other artisans like blacksmiths, carpenters and goldsmiths in the society and later they are gradually looked down in the society as they disposing of the dead animals. In spite of their low status in the society, the contribution of the leather workers has been enormous. The goods produced by them with leather have been used for the agriculture and economic development since ancient times. In fact, almost all the sections of the society were directly or indirectly depend on them. The traditional leather technology developed by these communities like tanning and cleaning process has been appreciated by the foreign scholars like Marcopolo, who visited India in 13th century and the leather goods produced by them in India had a great demand in the foreign countries at that time⁴.

The uses of Leather in traditional rural society:

The leather was used as water bags, blood storage covers, postal bags, bicycle seats, besides there were very beautiful leather mats in red and blue, chisled with figures of beasts and birds mostly delicately sewn in gold and silver threads, were exported during the 13th century. The horses have two bands in their headstall. But when the spike (behind jaw) is intended, the headstall has three bands, one passing over the nostrils another beneath and third above the eyes. Horse having the reins going plainly to the back of the jaw⁵.

Dappu or Tappeta (a kind of Drum) has been used in rural areas in Andhra from very ancient times. It is used to spread any information to public at large and also used during festivals, fairs, marriages and rituals like death ceremonies and the *Tappeta* (should be played only by the people of Madiga caste only) also made up of leather itself.

The agricultural implements which were used by the peasants in rural areas till date are like *Neella Titti* (water bag), *Patteda* (leather belt), which used to tie up necks of ox or bulls, *Vodisela* (a sort of Catapult), which used to drive away the birds and beasts during the harvest and *Mota Bokkena* (leather tube), which used to lift the water from wells to irrigate the fields.

A few leather articles, which are using in traditional society till today, also manufactured by Madigas with their own technology. These are like *Bantham* (Toddy tappers belt), *Kolimi Thitti* (Air blower), *Kalapa* (Barber's bag), *Kota Gudda* (a piece of cloth used by well diggers), *Putti* (a small boat used by Fishermen) and other religious amulet called *Antram* (magical amulet) etc.

Process of the Tanning:

The hides of oxen and buffaloes are dressed as follows: For each skin take 2 seers (1 213/1000 lb.) of quick lime, and 5 or 6 seers measure (about 1 1/3 ale gallons) of water, and in this mixture keep the skins for eight days, and rub off the hair. Then for each skin take ten seers, by weight, (about 6 lb) of the unpeeled sticks of the *Thangedu*⁶ and 10 seers measure of water (about 2½ ale gallons), and in this infusion keep the skins for four days. For an equal length of time, add the same quantity of *Thangedu* and water. Then wash, and dry the skins in the sun, stretching them out with pegs⁷.

The skin will be removed and stretched on the floor; by keeping inside out it will be dried under the sun, after applying lime. Leather, the skin will be folded and kept in an earthen pot. A stone will be kept on the skin as weight, and extra lime water will be poured in to the Tub, so that the entire skin would be soaked in lime water. The system will be kept without disturbance for a couple of days. To enhance the speed of the chemical reaction in the pot, after two days the whole content will be whirled with a long stick. That will be continued for 5 to 6 days. Because of the chemical reaction in the Tub, the hairy part of the skin would be removed and later would take out the skin to spread it on a long stick to remove the slippery outer layer by a knife. This process is called as '*Ladda*'⁸, and then the skin would appear in pure white⁹.

In the second stage of the tanning process, the skin would be made harder. For this, the dried acacia barks are used. A *Gutam*¹⁰ is used to remove the upper cover of the acacia bark. These barks would be then spread at the bottom of an earthen pot, for about two inches thick, and skin would be kept on these barks. Pressing the skin into the gaps of the barks and folding the four sides to the centre and keeping barks in each fold, a compact package would be made with skin and barks. Water would be poured on this whole package so that, the skin will be lightly pressed between water and acacia barks. It will be kept for 5 to 6 days. Every day the tanner would whirl the skin inside water for about one hour and finally the skin would become brownish red and hard in nature. It is now ready for manufacturing various leather articles.

Madiga identifies four parts in the making of shoe and they are *Atchu*, *Patteda*, *Ungatam* and *Eduruvaru*. The foot wear prepared by the Madiga according to interests of consumers and asking consumer to keep his foot on the leather sheet, Madiga will take the measurement of his sole and cut the sheet accordingly. *Patteda* is the strip of the leather, which could be fixed to the opposite sides of the sole, to fasten the foot with sole, *Patteda* will be decorated with designs. *Ungatam* is the adjustment made at the front side of *Atchu*, to insert the toe. Here also a small leather strip is fixed both ends to the sole. The narrow leather strips, which connect *Ungtam* and *Patteda* are called *Eduruvaru*.

Conclusion:

During the process of Globalisation and Westernisation, Madigas could not advance economically and politically, though they are masters in leather making but not became best in the present times. They were the only caste, who carried tanning as their occupation from the past, but now the whole leather industry is under control of capitalists and upper castes and the Madigas did not have enough capital to invest in their own leather industry. If Government would give proper support, Madigas may retain their occupation and get proper income.

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