

The Dandora Campaign



Dandora poster presence in the temple town of Bhadrachalam on the Godavari river

‘The Madigas of Andhra Pradesh have every reason to rejoice ...’

R. Akhileshwari 1997.
Sunday Spotlight,
Deccan Herald,
Bangalore 8/6/97

The Madiga community among the Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh is rejoicing at its historic victory in getting the 59 sub castes among them categorised according to their population size, as in the case of BCs. While these categories will apply for education and job reservations only, it nevertheless is a step that will set right a historic injustice which clubbed SCs together into a mass, rather injudiciously, that saw the majority Madiga community handicapped in the face of competition from the more advanced and educated Mala and Adi Andhra communities.

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu announced the categorisation of the SC sub castes on Thursday even as the Madiga Maha Padayatra was moving inexorably towards Hyderabad to lay siege to his house to register their demands. The three-year old struggle of the Madigas acquired a sense of urgency with the decision to launch the 1,000-odd km trek to the city to highlight their demands. While predictions were being made of a blood bath between the two major SC communities, the Madigas and Malas, and fears of playing into the hands of their class and caste enemies were voiced, not a single violent incident took place in the 52 days of the *padayatra* by hundreds of Madiga youth as they trekked in scorching summer heat across sleepy villages, rested in huts, and gave a sense of pride to the community for raising their voice against an injustice that had been conveniently made light of or swept under the carpet.

Said Dr P. Muthiah, director of the SC & ST Cell in Osmania University, 'The issue was hanging fire for the past ten years ... it was boiling ... the decision is a huge victory ... as long as there is injustice there will be a cry for justice,' he told *Sunday Spotlight*. Asked why the issue came to the fore and caught the imagination of the Madigas at this juncture, he said awareness and consciousness had spread immeasurably among the SCs. It was a happy coincidence that conscientisation of the masses about the injustice coincided with the emergence of a sincere, committed and powerful leadership to take charge of and lead the movement. 'It is astounding how Madigas have been made aware, how they articulate this injustice ... thousands of them are articulating it, in every *basti*, in every Madiga *wada*, In every village,' he said.

The long march

The Madiga Maha Padayatra was part of the strategy adopted to mount pressure on the government to accede to their demand. Begun on April 14 in Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's village of Naravaripalli in Chittoor district by presenting their demands to his octogenarian parents, the *padayatra* of Madiga Dandora passed through seven districts, covering 1,000-odd km. The Dandora youth, dressed in dark blue trousers and shirts, holding a stick in the hand, walked at least 20 km a day, stopping in at Madiga *basti* to rest in the night. Everywhere they were received with the beating of drums, the traditional job of Madigas.

Krishna Madiga, the 30-year old convener of the Madiga Reservation Struggle Committee, was trying to rest after the long trek in Hyderabad on Thursday night, even as he was being congratulated on his victory (earlier in the day the chief minister had announced the acceptance of the categorisation). In an interview to *Sunday Spotlight* he pointed out that the Dandora struggle had been peaceful and despite the fact that his 'army' of followers were young and angry they had not allowed their emotion to get the better of them. 'In the three-year long struggle, we did not cause destruction worth even three rupees,' he said. As for his achievement, he said he had achieved it without having to wage a war or take the help of a political party. 'Our weapon is not a gun but the drum,' he said about the instrument that is associated with the Madigas in these parts since they wield the drum on all occasions such as birth, death and marriages. 'We will beat our drums so loudly that the ruling classes would have to heed us or their ear drums will burst,' he said.

Krishna Madiga likes to compare the Maha Padayatra with the Long March of Mao and the Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi to mobilise and fight for social justice as enunciated by Babasaheb Ambedkar. The aim of the agitation, he said, was to remove the social disparities among the various sections of the Dalit community. Apart from demanding justice, the movement was aimed at emphasising the fundamental rights of all persons.

The *padayatra* had served twin purposes: conscientise the Madigas about the injustice heaped on them for the past 50 years by a skewed reservation policy, and also create awareness on the teachings of Babasaheb Ambedkar. The march was to have ended with about 20 lakh Madigas laying siege to the chief minister's house but the police did not give permission for such a huge congregation and with the help of the High Court, the Dandora got permission to assemble only on the city outskirts and take only a delegation to the chief minister's house to hand over a memorandum.

Krupakar Madiga Ponugoti, state co-convener of the Madiga Reservation Struggle Committee, termed this as 'state's caste discrimination' which was akin to keeping the SCs out of the village because of their caste. 'Our struggle has been for human dignity, our

fundamental rights and it has been peaceful and yet we have been treated so shabbily,' said the 27 year-old highly articulate activist who never went to school. The Madigas are traditional cobblers. In fact, the Madiga Dandora believes, today the Madigas' economic situation is by far the worst in the past seven decades, if not more.

The Malas, on the other hand, who were marginal landowners or landless labourers, got access to education under the influence of Christian missionaries and since then there has been no looking back. Malas perhaps made the best use of the reservation policy. Today, after 50 years of reservation policy, Malas are predominantly present in the reserved slots, whether in schools and colleges or government or in elected positions, in accessing and availing government's economic betterment programmes, housing and so on. Malas however question both the Madiga claim on majority in population and the dominance of Malas in taking reservation benefits. They quote 'unpublished' figures of the 1991 census and claim that Madigas, contrary to their claims, constitute only 46 per cent, with the other communities constituting 54 per cent. As for the claim of Malas appropriating SC reservation in jobs, they point out that as many as 30,000 posts in the government have been lying vacant for want of qualified candidates. If Malas were all that educated, surely so many posts would not have been vacant.

An immediate gain for the Madiga will be in this very area: the government has decided to fill up the vacant posts which had been held up by the High Court pending the decision on the SC categorisation. What about the deep divide brought about between Malas and Madigas? While some workers point out that they were never united on any issue other than on untouchability, the leaders however speak differently. They say far from being divided, the categorisation brings about unity. Dr Muthiah improvises on Dr Ambedkar's saying that there can be no equality without liberty: 'There can be no unity without equality and liberty,' he said. The Dandora warriors are as enthused by the response they have got from neighbouring states to their unique struggle as they are disheartened by the indifference of the media to the first successful people's struggle in a long time. Madigas from Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Kerala have participated in their meetings in solidarity. Categorisation in AP is bound to set off similar demands in other states.

Sambaiah Gundimeda 2005.

**Madiga Dandora: A Social Movement
for Rationalisation of Dalit Reservations**

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On the morning of September 2, 1996, more than 40,000 Madigas from various districts of Andhra Pradesh took a massive rally from Indira Park to the Babu Jagjivan Ram statue in Basheerbagh area, Hyderabad. Braving the continuous rain, they stood firmly in front of the statue and staged a dharna. Men and women, old and young, children, educated, literate and illiterate, all stood valiantly against chilly wind, listening to the speakers, Madiga leaders shouting from the loudspeakers on 'the classification of Scheduled Castes on the pattern extended to the Backward Classes', on 'social justice for the Madigas', on 'Madigas' share in the SC reservations', and on 'categorisation of reservations as a way to social justice for the most disadvantaged'. The busy traffic from four sides, from Secunderabad, Hyderguda, King Koti and Nampally to Jagjivan Ram's statue was blocked. Battalions of police contained the Madiga activists with guns and *lathis* (sticks). The Babukhan estate with its mammoth building, the biggest in the whole area, was resonating Dandora activists' slogans. 'We are ready even to sacrifice our lives for our reservation rights'; 'CM Chandrababu Naidu should come to the stage and announce classification'.

Then evening had fallen. Small children were crying with hunger. Old people changed their position from standing to sitting. Occasional rain tested the grit of the demonstrators. But nothing seemed to deter the determination of the Madigas. They continued to stand there. However, there was no sign of the Chief Minister of the state. Instead, at around 6pm the government sent a delegation of Madiga legislators from the ruling Telugu Desam Party, Manda Jagannatham, Rajaiah and Sudarshan, to assure the people that the government was committed to justice for the Madigas. They also mentioned the CM's announcement in the Legislative Assembly, early in the morning that day, of a commission set up to inquire into their demand. The demonstrators were hardly convinced and forced the delegates to leave the stage.

When his delegates failed to convince the demonstrators it fell upon the CM's own shoulders to directly take charge of the situation. At about 10pm Madiga leaders received a call from the CM's residence that he wanted to see them. On reaching there, he assured them of a commission of inquiry and categorisation within 45 days. The crowd filled with joy. They began clapping, laughing, and foot stomping for a long time, and congratulating one another.

Reporting next day on the Madigas's dharna, *Vaaritha*, one of the local Telugu newspapers, stated:

In the last one decade Andhra Pradesh never witnessed such a massive rally by the marginalised sections for justice. Any agitation begins in the morning and ends by the evening of the same day. However, Madiga movement seems to set a different trend. Madigas, who came to Hyderabad from hundreds of kilometres from different parts of the state, suffered from lack of drinking water and minimum facilities. They stood on the road, ate on the road, drank on the road and slept on the road. This reporter does not have words to describe the hardships suffered by the children and women. Despite the continuous rain and cold wind the Madigas stood in front of Babu Jagjivan Ram's statue the whole day and night, a full 23 hours, for an assurance from the Chief Minister.

It is interesting to note here that for the Dalits, either Madigas or Malas or any other socially and politically conscious Dalit castes, Ambedkar had been the leading spirit. In all their protests and demonstrations, slogans in praise of Ambedkar and display of his picture are customarily important. A gigantic statue of Ambedkar had been erected in front of Hussain Sagar Lake on Tank Bund that connects Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Dalit demonstrations were, in the capital city, used to taking place in front of this statue. But on September 2, something different happened. The Madiga activists instead of leading the demonstration towards Ambedkar statue took it towards Babu Jagjivan Ram's statue in Basheerbagh. Every state in India has numerous Dalit castes which are different by name and occupations, and there has been a tendency to compare one's own caste and status with another Dalit caste in another state or region with similarities in occupation. While the Malas of AP identify themselves with Ambedkar's Mahar caste in Maharashtra, the Madigas equate themselves with the leather-makers of other states, especially Chamars of UP, Punjab and Bihar in North India. After the massacres of Madigas and Malas in Karamchedu and Chundur respectively, they launched a united struggle against Kammas' and Reddys' oppression. In their mobilisations and protest demonstrations the symbol of Ambedkar was used to awaken consciousness among the Dalits. However, after the emergence of the Madigas' Dandora, while Ambedkar continued to be the icon for Malas, the Madigas

replaced Ambedkar with Babu Jagjivan Ram, a Chamar Congress activist and Minister from Bihar. It was recreating an icon out of Jagjivan Ram. It was commented that, while Jagjivan Ram had been dead and removed from the public memories in his own state, his ghost suddenly resurrected in AP as he was given a new meaning in Dandora movement.

Six months had passed after the CM's announcement and assurance. But the Commission of Inquiry did not complete its inquiry and categorisation was delayed. The Dandora activists saw this as renegeing on the part of the CM. There inexorably followed cycles of mobilisations and demonstrations by the Madigas. Hundreds of meetings were organised, from small villages to towns and cities. They staged demonstrations and protests in front of district Collectorates (District Magistrate's offices), government offices and the state Legislative Assembly. Madiga youth volunteered police arrest and filled every prison cell in the state. There were separate demonstrations for the categorisation of SC reservations from Madiga children (*Bala Dandora*), Madiga women (*Madiga Mahila Dandora*), Madiga employees (*Madiga Employees Dandora*) and Madiga students and youth (*Madiga Youth and Vidhyardhi Dandora*). A young man committed suicide leaving a note stating 'categorisation of SC reservations' as his 'last wish'; two other Madigas were killed in a conflict with the Malas, the other Dalit caste opposing the categorisation. Organisations for civil liberties and political parties extended their support.

The Dandora felt that the government was buying time in the guise of the Commission. It was agreed that unless strong pressure was put on the government, it would continue in its inertia. As a dual strategy, to put pressure on the government and to mobilise the Madigas and awaken their consciousness, Krishna Madiga, the Dandora leader, set on a long-march, to cover a distance of 1000 kilometres, which came to be known as the Madiga Maha Pada Yatra.

By April 14, 1997, the birthday of Ambedkar, the Dandora leadership has reached Naravaripalle, the CM Chandrababu Naidu's village in Chittoor district. Before they embarked upon the Yatra they submitted a memorandum to Ammalamma, mother of the CM, which had a dramatic effect. While submitting it they asked her 'whether she, as a mother, would distribute her earnings to her children equally or favour only one and ignore others'. Her reply was that 'she would treat all her children equally'. It was mentioned by the Dandora that they had taken this response of Ammalamma as the 'blessing of a mother.' Krishna Madiga said, as reported in *The Hindu* of May 6: 'I do not know if the Chief Minister respects the words of the Governor, but I believe that every individual would at least respect the words of his own parents.'

The actual Yatra became a sensation with the public as well as the media. Madiga Dandora suddenly caught the attention through this Yatra. *The Hindu* also reported:

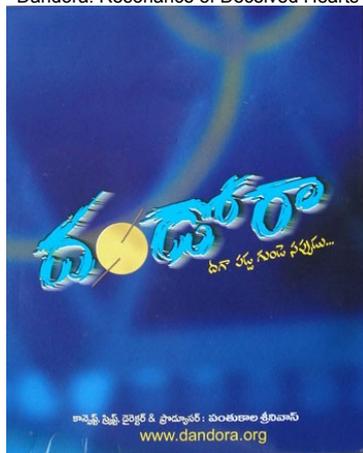
... as the clock struck two on Sunday, a group of youths wearing the anklets of dancers and beating drums started the walk, announcing the 'waging war against the Government's indifference to the Madigas' problems'. This proclamation is the 'Dandora', the traditional form of announcement in the villages, and the movement has come to be called the 'Madiga Dandora'. The group holds wayside meetings at the Madiga hamlets situated on the outskirts of every village early in the day. The network of Madiga Yuva [Youth] Sena is so extensive that they work as the courier system conveying the information about

where the group would stop for lunch or halt for the night. The host villagers organise lunch and dinner... About 500 people march together but about 300 of them are people of one village, who escort the group to the next village, when people of the next village take over. ... Their legs have swollen and have blisters, yet they walk with determination, about 20 to 30 kilometres a day, in order to awaken the Madigas. A jeep with their clothes and foodstuffs, and a trailer carrying a drum of drinking water follows them. Mr Manda Krishna, who has taken the suffix 'Madiga', leads this group on a journey by foot from Naaravaripalle, the native place of the Chief Minister Mr N. Chandrababu Naidu in Chittoor district to his official residence in Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad.

This march was depicted as equivalent to Dandi March undertaken by Gandhi. If Gandhi undertook the Dandi March for the rights of the locals against the foreigners, Madiga Maha Pada Yatra was acclaimed as a march not only for the rights of the Madigas but for the rights of every marginalised caste and community for their 'due share' in the reservation facilities. Further, they assured everyone, the 'march' was not against any group or caste but for a society which is based on equality, where everyone is treated equally and rights and privileges are distributed equitably among the marginalised castes (Personal interview with Krupakar Madiga, co-convenor of the MRPS, Hyderabad 14.3.03.)

The state had witnessed unprecedented violence and conflict among the Dalits themselves. Finally the government yielded to the Madigas demand on the basis of Ramachandra Raju Commission's Report and passed legislation categorising the Dalit reservations. The Mala Mahanadu, emerged to counter the Madiga Dandora, objected to the state's Act by lodging a writ against it. Now the battle ground shifted from the street demonstrations to the seat of justice. While the High Court of the state favoured the Act, the Supreme Court, on the other hand, invalidated it. Amidst the Madigas claims and demands and the Malas counter claims, Dalit politics, movement and leadership became so fragmented that any unity among Dalit castes, organisations and leaders belonging to various castes appears to be a mirage.

Dandora: Resonance of Deceived Hearts



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