Chapter 1
Roots of Madiga identity (1)

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In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh members of a small caste, Chindu by name, act out a confrontation between Jambava, the first ancestor of Madigas, and 'Brahman'. Madigas are one of the two major, formerly 'Untouchable' caste clusters or blocs of linked endogamous groups of this region. Their main traditional occupations have been focussed on leather. Chindus are not themselves leather workers; they are performers with the right and duty to perform for village communities of Madigas as part of their hereditary occupation.

The confrontation of the 'Untouchable' and the Brahman, at first sight the key feature of the performance, displays the centrality and opposition of these two sections of Indian society [...]. A living caste purana here provides a complex of richly contextualised and related stories and contentions, presented by those for whom they are directly significant and to informed and for the most part personally involved audiences. [...] A prime significance of this caste purana [...] is in providing a forceful reminder of a previous and here persisting order in which the sheer negativity of the Untouchable category had yet to take hold, in which, in varying degree, the castes so reduced were able to distinguish their identities with pride. What emerges is a world view which does not seek to explain away the discrimination under which they labour but contextualises it and focuses on presenting an embraceable identity.

Madigas, Chindus and the Jamba Puranam

Today's association of leather-working with chappals, the characteristic Indian form of leather footwear, often obscures the former importance of leather items in irrigation, farming, cattle husbandry, transport and many manufacturing processes. In a world where technological substitutes
had yet to be developed, leather goods were of immensely greater significance. The tanning of
animal skin to produce leather transforms a messy, smelly and rapidly decaying substance into one
that can be experienced as sweet and clean and of great utility. It is one of humanity's major historic
technological transformations, along with the smelting of metal. In India, complex values related to
a main source of the skin, cattle, generated a problem but did not prevent the development of a
major industry, carried on in almost every village and town across the land. Profitability of leather
has at times balanced ideas of religious pollution associated most strongly with its basic production
process and made leather-related castes one of the major sections of the population, the most
numerous and best known being the Chamars of North India. For the South, the great family of
Telugu leather-related castes has been analysed in a small but pioneering volume by T.R. Singh as
one of a number of 'constellations' of castes (Singh 1969, p. 31. [See Chaps 3 and 5 below]).
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, 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 fallback - 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 (kula puranam) here is focused on Jambava, or often Jambavamuni [a], the
ancestral Madiga, and is generally termed the Jamba Purana. Such myths and their hereditary tellers
are well known by and for many castes in Andhra Pradesh (Subbachary 2000, 2001; cf. Shah &
Shroff 1959; Das 1968). Madigas are distinctive here only in having several different groups
owning and telling their own versions of the caste myth in their own ways. Apart from the Chindus
on whose version this paper focuses, there are Nulakachandaiah who are caste gurus, keepers of
legal records and genealogies, as well as narrators. There are also Dakkalis, Baindlas, Asadis and
Masthis, each with their distinctive - but changing - specialisms. Versions from all these have been
recorded but only a Chindu text, to be discussed here, has yet been published. The Chindus are
performers of yakshaganas, an ancient genre of musical theatre with stories drawn from the major
epic traditions, Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the puranas. These have taken oral and, from
ancient times, written forms. Puranas were defined as early as the fifth century AD as dealing with
five themes: genesis, destruction and regeneration, genealogy, cosmic cycles and dynastic histories
(Coburn 1984, p. 21). The list remains usefully indicative of the content of this Jamba Purana.
Yakshagana is one of the ways in which the puranic tradition lives on, if now more strongly in some
regions of India than in others.(2) In the area in question, Chindus are one of two small castes with
performance of this kind as their specialism; there are also numerous amateur troupes of
enthusiastic yakshagana performers, Madigas prominent amongst them.

[...]
The Chindu treatment of the Jamba Purana in yakshagana style is generally known amongst
performers and audiences as 'Gosangi Vesham'. 'Vesham' signifies a made-up and costumed role,
here in the first place and most obviously Jambava, the Madiga first ancestor. Its performance
involves dialogue, song and dance, with accompanying musicians. Amongst the components of the
Jambava role which will be noted is, however, the power to pacify the enraged goddess through his
dancing. This identifiable and, as it turns out, separable role within a role is Gosangi. In the
narrative of the performance it is passed on from Jambava to his Chindu son and hence to the
Chindus as a whole. They, as performers by caste, are providing the player for the Jambava role, as
well as for the other roles required, Brahman and whatever supporting characters may appear in the
performance known as a whole by this title, Gosangi Vesham. The name 'Chindu', which here
represents the caste, means also the dance steps which are a key part of the Gosangi performance.
From this association the caste itself may also be called Gosangis.
Though its style is closely linked to yakshagana, Gosangi Vesham is distinguished from it in several important ways. Chindus are not summoned to perform but follow their own programme of visits to a series of villages in which they have rights (mirasi) of support and performance. They stay for several days, at first performing overnight as is usual for most village performances. On the last day or possibly two days of their visit they perform, instead, in the daytime, first Gosangi Vesham and then Yellamma Vesham. The central vesham or role in the latter is of the living idol of a goddess with whom Madigas have a special but not exclusive relationship. Yellamma herself, a popular goddess to whom animal sacrifice is directed, is vividly described in the Gosangi Vesham but does not appear there. When she does appear subsequently, she is played by a female Chindu performer and becomes the object of worship (puja) in a procession from house to house around the Madiga area and beyond. The two performances together become a forceful assertion, directed both to Madigas themselves and to other villagers more generally, of the special significance of Madigas. Through Yellamma, their importance for the religious interests of many other villagers is displayed; through the Gosangi Vesham, they assert Madigas’ cosmic significance, practical importance, learning and piety, in the face of everything for which the Brahman tradition, in their perception of it, stands.

The Gosangi Vesham

The content of the living purana has now to be outlined, drawing on two main sources, both from Nalgonda District of Telangana, the north-eastern region of Andhra Pradesh. One is a village performance observed, recorded and videoed in March 2003, the other a published Telugu text (Venkateswarlu 1997). In addition, an as-yet unpublished paper and discussion with its authors have brought in a wider range of experience (Reddy & Harischandra 2006).(3)

Preparations for the village performance took place at the house of the Madiga leader of a yakshagana troupe in a village of about 4000 people, 140 kms from the state capital Hyderabad. The Jambava himself was the main focus of attention, his costume and make-up heavily laden with explicit symbolic reference (Reddy & Harischandra 2006). Two subsidiary performers, playing members of high and low status trading castes, Komati and Balija, and the other main protagonist, Brahman, joined him. Four dappu drummers arrived, led by one of the two elders of the Madiga community. Their first task was to deliver Komati and Balija to the performance space at a street corner in the neighbouring section of the village belonging to the Goud or Toddy Tapper caste. Once arrived and already attracting an audience, the two played out a short comedy of interactions between themselves and a farmer character in everyday dress. Such supporting caste veshams - performances of stereotypical caste roles - are usual, but the particular choice was unexpected and unfamiliar to most: Washerman and Barber had been expected. Though such opening episodes are essentially about gathering an audience in preparation for the arrival of Jambava, they establish the inter-caste context and theme from the beginning.

Meanwhile the final stages of Jambava's own preparation and the ritualisation of the event were completed at the gate of the house yard. Turmeric and pink patches representing the smallpox with which Yellamma is associated were applied to his legs, water poured around his feet, a coconut broken and vermilion (kumkum) applied to foreheads of the other participants, signalling their participation in worship. Decked in leaves of the neem tree (Azadirachta indica), preceded by the drummers, and with a canopy carried along behind him, Jambava then advanced out of the colony brandishing his cutlass and a heavy bamboo stick and dancing fiercely (raudra). Brahman, with book, spectacles, an elegant black stick and his umbrella open against the sun, walked calmly along in the same procession.
Themes and format

The performers distinguished three puranas as making up their Gosangi Vesham. The first is the Adipurana dealing with origins, the second the Shaktipurana dealing with the feminine principle of force or energy (sakti), the Goddess and village goddesses, and the third the Basavapurana dealing with the significance of leather [subsequent evidence suggests otherwise [b]]. Performance is continuous however. The three sections start in the order suggested but interweave as they are developed. Confrontation as a narrative theme is directly relevant mainly for the last: in the two preceding, Brahmans as such are significantly absent from the stories told. The Trimurthis - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - have their place in the Adipurana but it is, as will be seen, a subordinated one. The form throughout is, however, confrontation moderated by co-operation: Brahman facilitates Jambava's explanations from the beginning, respectfully asking him to explain himself and prompting the next stage of the narrative. Jambava intersperses his dialogue with songs, mostly with responses (vanta) from the musicians, and the cindu footwork. The songs are more or less relevant, more or less readily understood, sometimes subsequently explained. Brahman keeps mostly to dialogue and supporting action. In the observed performance but not in the text, he was the more fluent performer, at times helping Jambava out with his own points and explanations. At the same time he was intermittently provocative. Jambava responded physically, once or twice chasing Brahman escaping from the performance site altogether. His response to the most offensive and outrageous of Jambava's assertions was to cry exaggeratedly, to the amusement of the audience. They also tricked each other on occasion, with acted humour relevant to their role. Brahman offered Jambava his fine scarf if he could catch it; but then threw it bundled into a ball into the air, in the opposite direction. Jambava got Brahman to bend before his seated self, as described below. He interacted with a young boy in a sketch about wanting to buy sweets as another family had done; this had been for their grandfather's death anniversary. 'Grandfather', when will you die?' responded the boy. He enquired of his fellow Chindus about their performing of lady roles, and parodied the way it should be done. The performance ended, in typical yakshagana style, with mangalam, auspicious praise for the gods and for the sponsors of the event, performed by Brahman. The performers then returned as they had come, in procession to the Madiga settlement.

Adipurana

At the beginning of the text, Jambava claims that he was sent to earth one night by Brahma, Vishnu and Ishwara (Shiva). Almost immediately, in a song he proclaims himself as 'born six months before the earth itself'. Then there is a lotus in the waters and its flowers are producing fruits. Jambava cuts one open and Adishakti emerges, crowing and dancing like a peacock. She delivers three eggs. What follows expands and fills this out with a second and apparently different genesis narrative of the emergence from nothingness of the sound Om with lights flashing colours. Names are acquired and these names are the original god, Adidevudu. From it/him the waters formed and the lotus in the waters. And in the lotus, again six months before the birth of the earth, Jambava was born.

In the main development the precedence of Jambava is therefore boldly established. He is present at the origin of everything. Though he is going on to proclaim himself the grandfather (tata) of Brahma, Siva and Vishnu - the Trimurthis - he has from the beginning a separate identity distinguishing him from the gods.

Though not carried systematically all through, a claim that Madigas recognise eighteen ages (yugam), as compared with Brahmans' four, provides the frame for ordering this and the following
narratives. Their names are recited in the first example of the naming and listing which occurs throughout. It is one of the favoured forms of learning - or performance skills - displayed repeatedly by Jambava. It was in the first age that the original god was born. Subsequently he is most often called Parabrahmasvarupam which may be glossed as 'the essential self-created spirit', and he has super-anthropomorphic form: five faces, ten eyes, ten hands, and all the vedas in him. A lotus and other plants in the water were created in the second age. Jambava himself emerged from the water looking like a hairy animal and carrying out austerities (tapas) and this marked the end of the fourth age. In the fifth it was the creation of Adishakti who also, like Parabrahmaswarupam, had five faces and ten hands but also an extra eye (palanetram) in her forehead, capable of burning up whatever it blazed on. She had five names, stars on her tongue and mantras in her mouth, and a jewel granting all wishes (cintamami) in her navel. Again she is in the lotus but otherwise the story is now different and Jambava and Adishakti have not met.

In the form of a bee, however, she searched the lotus looking for someone else and found Jambava sleeping. Growing up, she tried to persuade him to have sex with her but he refused: he was her elder brother, born in the preceding age. Instead she should undertake austerities (tapas) for the original god. By such means she would summon him to fulfil her desire. This was accomplished and, in the form of peacocks, she and he played in the waters. He impregnated her with three drops of his tears and she laid three eggs. From the eggs Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were born.(6)

Providing for them in the watery world required an island and the building of a nest on it, and Adishesha, the original serpent, to guard them. From the shells remaining, the rest of the form, furniture and living beings of the world were created. Their resonant names and vast numbers are impressively listed, arriving finally at Kamadhenu, the cow that provides unlimited milk - or perhaps anything that can be wished for; Kalpavriksham, the tree that is similarly bountiful with fruits; and Palasamudram, the ocean of milk the churning of which was to yield immortality for the gods. They were to provide sustenance for the newly born Trimurthis. At this point the purana of origination can be regarded as completed, with the Shaktipurana already grounded within it.

Shaktipurana

Jambava is still the muni, holy sage and adviser of the gods, in this next stage, but the narrative now goes beyond this to link him with his Madiga and other descendants and provide charters (Malinowski 1926) for their relationships, privileges and pains. The three young gods have grown up and Adishakti now wants sex from them. Though she claims to be only the mother of the eggs, hence their grandmother, they regard her as their own mother. They therefore refuse her and she seeks to kill them. They turn to Jambava for protection. His advice is to agree to her request but to ask her to bathe first. She will then remove her dangerous third eye before entering the water - the gods should seize it and use it to burn its owner herself up. They do as instructed and she is reduced to ash. From the ash Parabrahmasvarupam, who now re-enters the story to provide wives for the young gods, creates a new image of Adishakti. He divides it into five parts. From the head, the chest and the navel he creates Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, as wives for Brahma, Vishnu and Ishwara (Shiva) respectively. From the fourth part, two wives are created for Jambava, and from the last part Kali, not as a wife but to help the gods (devata) fight the anti-gods (asura) and demons (raksasa). She would do so in a succession of forms and would be worshipped and receive animal sacrifice under so many names: 43 are listed in this text, most of them the names of village goddesses. The passage locates the wives of Jambava amongst the goddesses but without being goddesses themselves. Their clearest significance is that they express the relationship between the Madigas and their Chindu performers: the first wife is the ancestress of the former, the second wife of the latter.
Having created wives for the Trimurthis, the task then is to get them married. This necessitates jewellery, requiring the creation of precious metals for it. Vishwabrahma and other craftsmen are required to make it, and Jambava to provide the leather bellows needed for melting the metal. Leather was however lacking: this is its first appearance in the narrative and it is noted that he did not have cows. Having given his word to provide the bellows nonetheless, a son, Yugamunindrudu, was born from the right side of his own stomach, to be killed by his own father so that his skin would provide the necessary material. Once killed and his skin - indeed his bones too - used for necessary implements, he still came back to life and cursed his father: 'you will forget your austerities and will become a Chandala' - the puranic outcaste. Nobody would touch him. Eventually the curse was limited to five thousand years, but Jambava nevertheless cursed him in return: 'you will be called Dakkali. You will beg for food in the houses of my descendants.' The episode is completed with the successful making of the jewellery and the creation of a Kummari (Potter caste) to make the pots needed for the marriages.

This is a passage of immense significance for Madigas. It establishes the link with skin or leather, only it is not the skin of cattle but almost Jambava's own. It exemplifies the dependence of others on the leather he provides, which is to be the major theme of the last section of the performance. And it fixes another inter-caste relationship, that between Madigas and Dakkalis, another of their satellites. At its centre is the rooting of untouchability, not in working with leather or even in anything to do with the cow, but in a human tragedy. Such generous pledging of help as Jambava displays and its potentially tragic consequences are a well-known spring of action and emotion in the epics and the rendition of stories from them in yakshagana: Lord Krishna, for instance, commits himself to avenge the spat-upon Gayodu in the popular Gayopakyanam. In yakshagana, however, ultimate tragedy is avoided through the powers of gods: here however, it is the outcome in mutual cursing amongst humans which is envisaged as having the direst of consequences for them and in their everyday world. Curses are, in the universe of Hindu thought, neither in themselves wicked nor the historic fantasy that they are in contemporary Western thought. It is not a mistake, nor wickedness, nor is it portrayed as entrapment by the gods: it is a tragic consequence of a good man trying in extraordinary circumstances to do what is both necessary and right.

[Basavapurana]

It is the following episode which 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 perspective, the impending problem lies elsewhere, and blame will be firmly attached to a non-Madiga. Parvati and her husband were moving in the forest. Parvati injured herself and blood from the wound became a tree and at its foot a boy, Chennaiah, was born. 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 come!'

The portents are bad: the disturbance has caused him to lose his lingams(7) 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. This is the offence: he has polluted it with his breath and the gods reject it: 'it is for Jambava and his grandson'. By implication, the gods are ceasing to eat beef as polluted; 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. Disaster hangs over the whole sequence of events and is expressed in a tirade of blame aimed at the unfortunate Chennaiah. Jambava proclaims him a Mala, the progenitor of the other main 'Untouchable' caste of the region.

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. In it Madigas will continue to deal with the successors to Kamadhenu as they die; 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.

Performance and the goddess

Next we are taken into the world of war between the gods and the anti-gods and demons. Shankara (Shiva) is killing them but with the resulting problem that from every drop shed of their blood another opponent springs up. Adishakti reappears to provide a solution: she prevents the blood falling to earth by catching it on her tongue and drinking it. However, this blood-drinking enrages her and she turns on the gods themselves. Jambava is recruited to pacify her. To carry out this great service he is presented with 32 badges of distinction or 'honours' (birudamu) by the gods. Vishnu creates for him the distinctive Madiga drum (dappu); Shiva presents a tiger skin; Virabhadra the ankle bells (gajjelu) which all performers who dance wear; Shanmuka peacock feathers; and so on. These are more or less closely connected with performing and displayed in the performance observed. Jambava, supported by his sons and his wives, pacifies the fury of Adishakti by his Gosangi Vesham and returns to his home, Jambalagiri.

Only now does Goddess Yellamma enter the narrative for the first time, in her Brahmanical form as Renuka, wife of the Brahman sage Jamadagni and destined to be killed at her husband's behest by her son Parashurama. The focus is now on Chindus rather than Madigas. Renuka/Yellamma is represented as fleeing from her son to Jambalagiri and seeking Jambava's protection. Parashurama, however, comes to the town, manages to find his mother and kills her. She becomes a demon and chases the people to kill them. Jambava therefore needs to protect his people from her but is unable to do it himself. He called first on his guru, Rudramahamuni. He could not help, but his mention emphasises yet again Jambava's standing and piety. Likewise his first wife's Madiga sons and his Dakkali son declared themselves unable to help. The Dakkali parried the request: his father having made him Untouchable, how could he possibly have that strength. Finally Chindu Jihmamuni, the son of his second wife, was asked. He accepted the task but on condition that all his father's 32 honours received from the gods should be passed on to him. This was agreed and, so equipped,
Jihmamuni and his wife Sridevasalani danced before Renuka and finally she was appeased. Yellamma - as she is now named in the text - blessed the couple and gave Jihmamuni seven gifts of her own ornaments. His wife was to perform Yellamma Vesham and they were to take it round people's houses every year. In return, they would receive offerings from the people.

The text appears then to revert to the perhaps older story which preceded this Renuka episode. Chindu Jihmamuni is again being given performance instructions but now by Parabrahmaswarupa and the other gods. Yellamma is not referred to again until the very end of the performance. Taking up the earlier story, the Chindus are to perform for Jambava's people and to take round with them the honours Jambava had handed on to them. There should be no marriage between Madigas and Chindus. The Dakkali son receives instructions too: he is to beg in the houses of Madigas and to live to the east of them. Five Jetti castes, attached to Madigas, Malas, Toddy Tappers, Weavers and Washermen - apparently descended from those to whom the falling drops of blood mentioned above gave rise - are also called for instruction. They are to make the people happy with their performances, except perhaps for the Madiga Jettis who are to be guards.

Learning, caste schemes and the challenge to Brahmanism

The Shakti purana theme has been completed and the stories of originations (Adipurana) are about to be with one short section grounding links with pastoral Gollas (Venkateswarlu 1997, p. 20). Jambava's claims to superior knowledge of caste and genealogy come to the fore. Only the [leather] theme remains to be finally developed. Cattle and leather are emphasised as the source of Madigas' importance for others, simultaneously as the source of problems for themselves. The latter is identified as essentially Brahmanical and is challenged. This is the theme that comes to dominate the last part of the performance.

The first major demonstration of superior knowledge here is the listing of castes in three separate schemes. [...] The theme of caste knowledge and the relationships of Madigas and other castes does not end here. Two further strands are woven together, one concerning puranic relationships of origins and genealogy - another Brahmanical sphere of knowledge to be contested (c) - the other representing the importance of Madigas' leather products for people of all castes. Relationships with Gollas lead the first strand: the idea that Lord Krishna was a Golla rather than - the usual Brahmanic version - only brought up by pastoralists (O'Flaherty 1975, pp 204-13) leads into genealogical issues. The Madiga version has Jambava giving his daughter, Jambavathi, to Krishna, making him the Madigas' son-in-law. The son of Jambavathi and Krishna, Sambudu, then married Lakshana, daughter of Dhuryodhana, the Kaurava king in the Mahabharata. (10) The extended and contentious debate refers to inter-caste marriages, mixed descent and anomalous births. Jambava uses it to ridicule Brahman ideas of proper descent and any radical separation between Brahmans and Madigas.

'Don't say that you are superior and Madigas are inferiors.
Oh fool! do you know who was superior and who was inferior in the past?
Don't talk without knowing the past!
Oh Brahman, you are the son of a donkey.
Brahmans are the slaves of other castes.
... to whom was Vyasa born?
Was he born to a Madiga or to a king?
... tell me who are bastards, Brahmans or Madigas?'' (Venkateswarlu 1997, p. 28)

Brahman bounces back with protests and counter-assertions. The text runs on in sharp banter and mutual abuse. Sexual morals and practices - whether it is Brahmans or Madigas who were born to
prostitutes (*lanja*); who practise abortion to hide sexual irregularities; who refuse remarriage to child widows - these and more are brought into vigorous contention.

Madigas' identification with leather is the last strand running through the final section of the performance. The dependence on them of other castes as leather users is argued, with song and acting, culminating in a final mocking of Brahmanical notions of leather as impure. Even Reddy landlords, Jambava asserts, though they will not touch Madigas, use the footwear made by them. Others depend on their leather for their traditional callings: Gouds use a leather sling made by Madigas to enable them to climb their toddy trees; Bhogams as dancers use it as skins for their drums; Washermen (*sakali*) as blinkers for their donkeys. Even Brahmans, when they draw water for their daily bath, must come into contact with leather. But not nowadays, responds Brahman: today we press the button on an electric motor. Ah, Jambava answers, but the belt on the motor is prepared by Madigas. 'Everything in the world can only work with the help of Madigas' (Venkateswarlu 1997, p. 34).

Mingled with this are direct challenges to Untouchability.

Brahman: 'Hey, you son of a dog, don't touch me!'  
Jambava: 'Hey, I touched you - you are impure!'  
He rebukes Brahman for calling him 'Untouchable' and educates him in the work of Sri Virabrahmam, a popular seventeenth century saint who denounced ideas of pollution and Untouchability.(11)

The published text ends with the acting out of a scene between Jambava as a contemporary village Madiga and Brahman as a would-be customer for his chappal repair services. Brahman asked him to mend his chappal; Jambava denied that Madigas do such work any more. Brahman tried to remind him that he would be wanting him to fix the propitious time for his son's marriage.(12) Jambava denied it: they are knowledgeable too and can fix it for themselves. Brahman appealed to his good nature and kicked the chappal to be mended over to him. In the performance this was a symbolic chappal, a stick with a thread tied round it: his own potentially polluting leather chappals remained firmly on his feet. Though the represented insult was supposed to anger Jambava, it also cued a word-play song proclaiming the central importance of footwear for life and for Goddess Yellamma herself. He then distracted Brahman with talk of Madiga marriage customs and his son's wedding, before asking him to try the repaired chappal. This necessitated his bending, only to be teased for bending before a Madiga. 'Yes, yes! That is how you pay the respect that everyone offers to Madigas. Bend down again and repair your own footwear' (Venkateswarlu 1997, p. 35).

This was too much: Brahman announced that he was going to Kashi, otherwise Varanasi the holy city of Hindu pilgrimage and death on the Ganges (Parry 1994). He enacted his going, finally overtly complicit in the undermining of Brahman ideas, values and even dignity. He comes to a river; his chappals will be soaked; the water is rising; he will carry them in his hands; the water has reached to his shoulders, to his head. So finally Brahman is carrying his leather footwear on his head. He demonstrates where the real priority lies, not in issues of purity and pollution but in keeping one's chappals dry.

In the performance, though the action was over with this final discomfiture of Brahman, it was he who led the final singing of praise to the gods and gave a concluding speech. In the past they used to perform Jamba Purana for the Madigas, he said. In return they would receive donations. But now these people from Hyderabad had come to watch their performance. God had sent these people from the city to help them. All Gods are the same: Adam, Eve, Allah, Rama, Krishna, all are the same. People from different places worship the God with different names. Finally, everyone set off back whence they had come, to the Madiga settlement for the working out of the 'help' which was to be provided.
Conclusion

This paper has outlined the performance of a living caste purana and the light it throws on its 'Untouchable' owners' placing of themselves in the world. It lives in the sense of being still performed, if probably less frequently than in the past, and in a dynamic adjusting of its legacy of narrative, song and issues to current circumstances. The account here has shown how the performance is framed as a confrontation between the 'Untouchable' and the Brahman, seeking to undermine the perceived claims to superiority of the latter in learning, in descent and in purity. It challenges notions of purity and pollution in terms of which the owners of the purana as traditional leatherworkers, associating these ideas particularly with Brahmans, know themselves to be devalued. Its claim is deeper and more radical however. [...] It is precedence rather than coevality which is claimed, calling on cosmogonic traditions emphasising the female Shakti and making secondary and junior the great male gods of contemporary Hinduism. [...] If precedence is the fundamental theme here, and the challenging of Brahman hegemony a contemporary relevance with strong local roots, the practical importance of Madigas for others is the second major element. It has two parts to it, leather and performance. Dependence of others on Madigas as the source of leather goods is established cosmologically in the provision, as so great a cost to themselves, of bellows for furnaces, making metal-working possible, and in relationships with Visvakarmas in recognition of this. The relationship with pastoral Gollas, at least in the region in question, is the major practical though less immediately telling example claimed. Relationships with Toddy Tappers and a mass of other secondary claims mentioned are becoming ever more tenuous with the decline in practical dependence on leather in recent times. This appears to be the point of greatest vulnerability in the puranic tradition here: as leather becomes increasingly residual in the historical experience even of Madigas themselves, its significance as a mythological concern is likely to be fading. A third theme is then performance signified in the Gosangi role, not merely as entertainment though there is certainly an element of this, but in relation to the goddess, her pacifying and worship. The purana, as has been seen, represents the power of Gosangi performance as having been passed on from the ancestor of the Madiga cluster as a whole to one branch, the Chindus, but as regards performing more widely, Madigas have remained active in their distinctive style of drumming and, since the mid-twentieth century, often in yakshagana performance. More recently they have also been active in contemporary performing arts as promoted by the cultural wings of parties of the left. Their identity as performing people therefore remains significant and, like the purana itself, alive to current change.

It is these aspects together which make the embraceable caste identity which is at odds with sheerly negative conceptions of 'the Untouchable', asserting instead a multi-stranded tradition of which people can be proud. The problematic aspects of Madiga identity are not ignored, but there is no reason to see them as, for Madigas, what the purana is primarily about. Exclusion, Untouchability and poverty are accounted for, but contextualised within powerfully positive elements. The ability to move and skin dead cattle is given a forcefully positive evaluation. The eating of beef is not represented as a mistake. Its confinement to certain castes is the consequence of a change of heart by the gods which at once secured a source of nourishment but also set apart those benefiting from it. A mistake had been made. It was not, however, to eat beef but to pollute it for others by blowing on a piece thrown back into the pot. Even this somewhat tangential mistake had been made, not by a Madiga but by the progenitor of their rivals, the Malas.

It was in any case not this, nor the gods, which caused Madigas' downfall. Jambava is caught up in an epic tragedy. It is the tragedy of his Dakkali son, born to be killed by his father to provide the leather needed for the bellows, cursing him in return, and the curse working out in exclusion through the intervention of Parvati's Mala 'son'. Analogies with the fate of the Pandavas at the root
of the Mahabharata epic and of Rama in Ramayana, both well known here through yakshagana and other performance genres, come to mind. Most particularly it resonates with the fate of the ever-faithful King Harischandra, condemned to serve an 'Untouchable' master in the burial ground and the subject of one of the most popular and moving dramas of all the many performed today in Andhra Pradesh." (13)