The village order
Part 2

The caste-in-village trap

This is the Village Republic of which the Hindus are so proud. What is the position of the Untouchables in this Republic? They are not merely the last but are also the least. He is stamped as an inferior and is held down to that status by all ways and means which a majority can command.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar
‘Untouchables or the children of India’s ghetto’
www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/

Chapter 7
The village order

Three contexts: 1890s – 1990s

Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough 1899.

Rauschenbusch-Clough reports from her research amongst Madigas around Ongole in coastal Andhra in the late 19th century. See Chapter 9, introductory paragraph. The quoted passages here focus on yetti service, within the village but entailing limited, though significant, movement beyond it.

[pp 204-5]
Soon after this Rutnam was ordered by the village Karnam[a] to carry a letter to a distant village. He had to drop all other work and go on this errand, nor could he expect to be paid for it. Some generations back the family had received a grant of four acres of land from the Rajah of Venkatagiri, and in turn for this they had to stand ready to do the bidding of the Karnam. It was Yetti-service, a service, exacted under provisions that closely resemble the serfdom of the middle ages. Rutnam tied the letter into his headcloth and went his way. Arrived at Petloor, he approached the Government Office, where the Brahmin clerks and officials sat over their task. He dare not go near, for great would be their wrath if even the air they breathed were polluted by the presence of a poor Madiga. But he stood afar, holding high the letter he had brought, and, soon a Sudra servant came to take it from him. They signified to him that he might go, and, after resting in the shade of a tree, he took a roundabout way home.

[pp 35-39]
In the old days, when there were petty Rajahs, tributary to some powerful dynasty, it happened occasionally that the Rajah or his minister, the Dewan, came to visit his domain. It was convenient for them, at such times, to find everything provided for them in the places where they halted. The potter was expected to provide pots; the washermen's service was required; the Munsiff brought eggs and milk; and the whole village drew on its resources. In turn for this service, the Rajah made grants of land to each according to the value of the service required of him on such occasions. To the Madigas fell the lot of being the burden-bearers; for, when roads were few and often impassable, the camp-baggage was placed upon the Yettis, to be borne from place to place. They, too, received a grant of land, seldom, it seems, more than four acres; and it yielded but little, for the Madigas had not the bullocks to
plough, nor the time to watch their growing crops.

Moreover, Yetti-service was not confined to the time when the Rajah came, or when he sent his Dewan; those in authority could at any time demand the service of the Yettis, and it was always service without pay. When the Karnam came to a village to collect the tax for the Rajah, the Yettis had to stand at the entrances of the village and see that neither man nor cattle went out. After the tax had been gathered, the money was tied into the scant clothing of the Yetti, and, two together, they went long distances to deliver it at the centres of the districts. They looked poor and ragged, and none suspected that they had money concealed about them. Arrived at the place of destination, they dared not approach the Brahmin accountants within. They stood afar off, and held the package high in their hands, till a Sudra servant came out to deliver it to the Brahmins within, who would have considered it pollution to accept anything from the hands of a Madiga direct.

There were daily recurring tasks for the Yettis. They had to gather wood for fuel for the Karnam's household. If there were letters to carry from village to village, the Yettis were pressed into service. If anyone wanted a guide to point the way on an untravelled road, the Yettis were placed at his disposal. Travellers who wanted burden-bearers made their request to the Karnam. He furnished the Yettis, but kept the payment for himself, giving them, at their clamorous entreaties, a mere fraction of what they had earned. If ever they dared to refuse to work, they were ill-treated, their few heads of cattle were driven to the pound, and the misery of their condition was only increased by their remonstrance.

Some of the petty Rajahs ordered their Karnams, or Dewans, to look for able-bodied Madiga men on the fields or in their huts, and to secure them for menial service. Accordingly they took men away from their homes, and, if they resisted, they were treated cruelly. This mode of procedure was resorted to especially when a Rajah desired to dig a tank in order to irrigate a district of land. A Madiga told me that his father was taken away from home by the servants of a Rajah, and forced to work on the tank at Podili for months. They threatened that they would beat him or bind him if he demurred. He received only enough to provide himself with food while digging. To his family there was nothing to send; they had to shift for themselves as best they could.


Reporting similarity and difference from Medak district of Telangana, in the former state of the Nizam of Hyderabad rather than the former British Madras Presidency of Ongole, and 70 years later,[b] the author suggests the way in which extra burdens suffered by some Madigas in the village were also rights enjoyed by them.

[Extracts to be added as available]
'Mahepura' is the pseudonym of a small town in Chitradurga district of Karnataka with a population of about 5,000 at the time it was studied in 1995.[d] The research there was part of a comparative study of seven Scheduled Caste communities in their local settings, concerned particularly with the ways people had challenged Untouchability through their own enterprise and with the results of their efforts. Here the focus was on those who had once been called Madigas but were more appropriately termed Adi-Karnatakas or AKs at the time.

[pp 158-66]  

The AKs in Mahepura: separation and integration

In a relatively exposed and commercialised place such as Mahepura many of the subordinating norms and structures that help to define 'Untouchable identity' are less elaborate than those found elsewhere in Karnataka or described in the literature. Overall, the ranking of castes is quite imprecise. Most people agree broadly which castes are high, which come in the middle, which are low and which fall at the bottom, but beyond this, finer gradations are neither clearly understood nor important. It is perhaps the inferiority of the lowest castes, including the AKs, that is most defined and most problematic. [...]
The Durgamma festival

The relation between the colony and the rest of Mahepura finds its richest and most nuanced expression in the annual festival in honour of the local goddess, Durgamma. As is generally the case with south Indian village festivals, the explicit purpose of a long and complex succession of ritual is to protect the settlement from evil and epidemics, by satisfying and thereby cooling the malevolent Durgamma and creating a barrier around the village. Although many of the communities living in Mahepura have a specific ritual role in the festival, and all Hindus participate as devotees, it will be seen that the AKs have a special role which is crucial to the success of the festival.

The festival is accounted for by a story, versions of which are found across South India. All castes in Mahepura except Brahmans tell the story in more or less the same way. The version below translates the story as told by an old AK informant:

A Brahman mother and her young daughter lived together. One day they encountered a man from a different region. He offered to work for them and in return he stayed in their house. As time went by they grew to like the man, who was always courteous and well mannered. So when the daughter reached marriageable age the mother thought that there was no need to search for a suitable boy whilst the man remained unmarried. So she asked him, he agreed, and the couple were married. They never enquired about the man's caste, and he never revealed it: he was, however, an AK(1). After a few years, they had a daughter. Following the birth of the child, he resumed his traditional work making and selling chappals. To conceal this from his family he went away each day to a mountain, returning only in the evening. One day his daughter asked to go with him, but he refused, saying that the area was full of wild animals and so too dangerous. But in secret she followed him and watched him at work. The father saw her and they returned home together. Once home the daughter told her mother what she had seen and showed some pieces of leather as evidence. The mother became very angry, and was transformed into a Durgi, a terrifying goddess. The man was scared and hid, climbing into the stomach of a buffalo through its anus. So the woman cursed him, saying that every year he would exist in a buffalo which should be sacrificed in front of her at a festival.

The story takes as its theme a transgression of caste norms of the worst possible kind: a man who is in the most extreme way polluting to a Brahman has married and had a child with a Brahman woman. The rage of the woman who is identified with Durgamma is thus a rage against the breaking of rules, and the sacrifice a re-establishment of them(2).

There is space here only for a very condensed account of the festival, based on the performance witnessed in 1995. I have supplemented this with informants' versions of typical festivals to draw attention to the elements that are seen as important or essential, without producing a normative account. The image is made five days before the festival by members of the Achari (metalworking) caste together with a Besta (Fisherman) priest, using soil from the bed of the village tank. They paint the goddess bright yellow and green, fearful colours that indicate the dangerous power
of Durgamma (cf. Hanchett 1988: 151 and Appendix A). The approach of the festival is announced to Mahepura the day before by the AD messenger or Thoti and the AK drummer.

The day itself is met with great excitement by all the Hindus. Chicken sellers and bars do a brisk trade, and animals are slaughtered and cooked. There is much animated discussion of what is to come. After preliminary pujas, Durgamma is carried around the old perimeter of Mahepura on a palanquin. The procession is led SC musicians, AKs and ADs drumming and Koramas playing wind instruments, and also a Madivala (Washerman) carrying an umbrella and lamp.(3) As the image passes by, women come out of their houses to perform ārathi and puja. The procession makes a slow and stopping way around the town, attracting a crowd, some of whom follow. As they reach the point on the route closest to the AK colony, three AK boys join, walking in front of Durgamma. Two carry pots of ‘toddy’ (in the past real toddy but now a substitute mixture of jaggery and water) and the other a large knife. By the time the goddess leaves the town and stops at an old well, there are hundreds of men following. At the well a Brahman and then the Besta priest perform a puja to purify the deity following its exposure to pollution during its journey through the village. It is then taken to an old temple, used only for this festival, where further pujas take place. After this there is a constant stream of people who come to the temple to offer vegetarian food, and perform puja. In the evening the Kurubas sacrifice a sheep or goat to Durgamma which is cooked at the temple, and individuals bring non-vegetarian food offerings.

Once the sheep or goats have been killed the priests cook the meat. When it is ready, they begin to arrange all the food that has been offered in front of Durgamma, making a large square pile of rice, surrounded by ragi balls. When it is nearly ready, they send word to the colony and the AKs bring buffaloes to the temple. The first of these is bought collectively by the people of the town, whilst the others are individual offerings made usually by members of other castes but given to the AKs a day or two before the festival. When puja begins, the drummers start playing again; the sound frightens the animals, which are held with ropes. After a sequence of pujas performed by the Besta and a representative of the AKs to the pots of ‘toddy’ and to the sacrificial knife, the buffalo is marked with kumkum and oil, and a tight ring is formed. The sacrificer lifts the large knife, and with a single blow cuts off the animals head. While he stands triumphantly with the knife aloft, others move to sever the right front leg at the knee joint and cut into the stomach to remove a certain piece of fat. The head is put on a cloth, directly facing Durgamma. The leg is placed in the animal's mouth, and the fat on its nose, on top of which a lamp is placed. All this is performed at great speed, as this is appreciated by Durgamma and is thus meritorious. The buffaloes eyes are still blinking after the head is ready. Then the other buffaloes, which have been brought by devotees, are sacrificed.

The heads are placed in a line beside that of the first sacrifice, and the bodies pulled away. Then a large basket is brought and excrement is removed from the stomach of the first buffalo and put in the basket. This is vigorously mixed with blood, rice, ragi balls and ‘toddy’. The resulting mixture (charga) is then carried around the edge of the town on his head. This is a dangerous task, which could result in death, so an old man is expected to volunteer. He is blessed by the Besta priest, and may also be garlanded. As he runs off with the basket, he is joined by young men. They move as a group, continually dropping some of the mixture and
shouting 'let next year be good!'

The next day a fair is held on the approach to the temple. People from Mahepura and surrounding villages come to offer puja, and to shop at the stalls. Puja is offered not just to the goddess but to the knife, and to the head of the first buffalo. The optional devotees’ buffalo heads are removed: as acts of personal devotion they have no role in the public aspect of the festival. Then at night the goddess is taken by the Bestas, with the musicians, and some AKs, to a place where the garlands are removed, puja is performed and the image left behind.

It is surprising that a festival of this kind continues with such vitality in Mahepura. What I wish here to stress is the seemingly paradoxical role of the AKs, which is seen most acutely from their sacrifice-centred view of the festival. Slaughtering buffaloes is clearly very inferior and polluting in the eyes of others and is recognised by AKs themselves as being so. Nonetheless, the festival hinges on the blood sacrifice. It is only the AKs who can kill buffaloes, and it is this act, including the encircling of the settlement, which averts disease and protects the place. The other ritual actions may be preparatory, as they are in the cases of the pujas performed by priests or private acts of devotion, such as the women’s pujas as the procession goes around the town. None of these elements succeeds in propitiating Durgamma. From this standpoint, which offers a different emphasis without contradicting other understandings of the festival, the AKs, as sacrificers, force a distinction between ritual status and ritual importance, combining centrality with subordination.

The value of the AKs’ role appears to be threatened and has perhaps already been undermined by two factors. First, although for most people in Mahepura the availability of allopathic medicine has not negated belief in divine propitiation as prophylaxis, there are signs that this aspect of the sacrifice is being replaced by the doctor. Both methods may work, but a visit to the doctor is much easier than the difficult business of sacrificing buffaloes. This is acknowledged by the main Besta priest who sees the festival more as a safety measure, with the treatment of illness a role taken chiefly by doctors, who happen to be exclusively Brahmans. So the importance of the AKs’ contribution is now reduced. Second, as will be described in more detail later on, there is a general shift in the ritual sensibilities of most if not all the people of Mahepura away from forms associated with a particular caste and locality towards a more standardised cult. The favoured forms tend to be associated with upper-caste and city norms, hence an emphasis on vegetarian rituals. This encourages the observer to see the buffalo sacrifice as 'backward' and distasteful. At present these values are not dominant in Mahepura however: the day after the sacrifice, members of all castes were eagerly discussing exactly how many animals were killed, how big they were and so on. Men sometimes describe how once when they were young they crept away from their houses to see the sacrifice. But the new values have penetrated a section of the population sufficiently for a number, especially of the more educated inhabitants, to no longer participate in the festival. In a broader way they are undercutting the value of the AKs’ role, whilst accentuating its low status.

Some of the younger and more politicised AKs also refuse to have anything to do with buffalo sacrifice. They see it as demeaning, and instead call for a less distinctive role in the festival. This would involve their performing puja with the other castes, on either of the days, but not dealing with buffaloes. The attitude of the
other AKs, who are in a great majority, is that it is their duty to take on their full role in the festival, not a matter for individual whim and fancy. Their difference in views is telling: for most AKs, their sacrificial work is important and is to be relished. They have a lively sense of doing something on which all depend in Mahepura, and are unconcerned by the polluting nature of the work. More than this, the sacrifice is an exiting event, and those who successfully behead an animal gain prestige. For most, to be AK is, from at least one perspective, to be, and to be known to be, low and impure, so objecting to any traditional work on the grounds of its impurity is senseless. I have been told by an AK informant that for them making chappals (another polluting part of their traditional work) is as natural as flying is to birds; at other times they see their work as a right. But the others take the ritual impurity of the sacrifice as their starting point. They argue that it is by continuing to do this kind of work that they maintain their reputation as low and disreputable people. If they want to be included as a ‘normal’ caste, they must gain the confidence to change so that they resemble the other castes. The reform-oriented thus regard purity and pollution as the most important status determinant, but, rather than being ascribed, see it as up for grabs, to be manipulated to the advantage of any caste that can act cohesively.

Other roles and inter-caste relationships

The AKs continue to perform other parts of their traditional work for the village. As has already been seen, the village messenger, an AD accompanied by an AK drummer, still inform Mahepura of festivals and important events, although in what is seen by others to be a reduced and reluctant way. They are compensated by a share of rice and other grains collected by them house-to-house around Mahepura once a year. Likewise for certain festivals AKs take on chākari work which involves cleaning temples, sweeping the road if a god or goddess is to move around the village, and tying auspicious mango leaves across the entrances to temples and other predetermined spots. The people who do this work are appointed annually. They receive payment in cash and a share of some land, although the latter is in name only, since the land, once irrigated by the village tank which no longer fills, is now used only for grazing.

Historically, there are other ritual practices that connect the AKs to the rest of the population. One illuminating case is a tradition that Brahmans require for their wedding rituals water used by the AKs in treating leather. This is sometimes referred to with some pride by older AKs, who stress the dependency of Brahmans on them. This dependency resembles that of the sacrifice: the water is polluting and was taken in secret to the Brahmans. It was nonetheless ritually essential. Although the practice seems to have fallen into disuse, it highlights the ambivalence of this relation.

[...]

The pursuit of higher status

Over the last forty years the Mahepura AKs have increasingly altered certain patterns in their general and ritual life in response to stimuli external to the colony.
This process of adaptation is highly visible and is not restricted to the AKs. There is no single dominant group to imitate, but rather a number of alternative, sometimes competing, styles and fashions. These have several foci: local Brahmans and Lingayats, general non-vegetarian castes living in Mahepura, ritual forms that are new to Mahepura that arrive with the allure of the City, and ‘secular’ styles - in clothing and manners, for example - that are perhaps the most obvious signs of self-assertion.

One means by which AKs have been able to pursue higher status has been by visiting the Brahman priest in Mahepura. There is a long tradition of the AKs approaching the priest for certain ritual items for weddings. In the past they would ask him to prepare the marriage tāli, and also wristbands used during the marriage. At times they would also ask for instructions, for example concerning the correct rituals that should be performed during a wedding. The priest would write these down for them, as he would not go into the colony. Over the last ten years or so, the range has expanded. Some of the AKs have consulted the priest about auspicious dates and times for a wedding, and a few have asked him to interpret astrological information to ensure that a couple are a suitable match. These Sanskritic elements have not greatly changed the form of the marriage itself. The only exception to this is the sacrifice of a goat, which used to take place before or on the wedding day, and has now been more or less abandoned. The naming of children is another area where the AKs are changing. There is a turning away from their traditional names which contain caste-related elements, either to names what were previously reserved for high castes, or to ‘modern’ names which, although they often are of Sanskrit origin and may have a religious meaning or connotation, are not caste-specific. The Mahepura priest has kept abreast of this and because of his flexibility, some AKs have started to approach him to ask for names based on the child’s astrological sign. They will often reject the older type of name in favour of high-caste ones, but rarely opt for ‘modern' casteless names as this trend has not yet penetrated the colony. They have also begun to consult the priest on the significance of the time of someone’s death. Where this is inauspicious he will give instructions for certain rituals to be performed. Occasionally they will also hire him to perform special pujas. However, there are several ritual roles and times, such as the maturation of girls, and house-warming where none of the AKs consult the priest. There are limits also to what he will do. He will not enter the colony or eat food cooked by them, and this restricts his role in life-cycle rituals. The greater flexibility becoming possible for Lingayat priests, in Nuliyur and elsewhere, should be noted[e].

[pp 169-174]

Untouchability

A second way in which the AKs are being increasingly integrated into the wider Mahepura community is through the erosion of various prohibitions that tend to be grouped together under the category of ‘Untouchability’. Kannada language has a complex vocabulary to deal with these issues. These are mostly articulated in terms of purity (e.g. sācha) and cleanliness (e.g. swachcha), as opposed to pollution (e.g. sūtaka, mailige) and dirtiness (e.g. galīj). In Mahepura, people appear to understand this in a relatively flattened way. They are not scrupulous about making distinctions, for example between sūtaka and mailige, tending to gloss all cases of...
pollution as *sūtaka*.(4)

It is possible to reconstruct a picture of Untouchability practices from the 1950s onward, as they are clearly within living memory. In the following discussion I describe various prohibitions all of which applied to the ADs as much as to the AKs, but for simplicity I will hereafter refer only to AKs.

Up to the mid 1960s members of other castes, particularly Brahmans and Shetty, would not touch or come close to AKs. It is recalled that when AKs approached Shetty-owned shops they would stand some distance away and say what they wanted. The shopkeeper would take the money and give the goods and any change on wooden sticks, or simply throw it to them. The AKs were expected to adopt an attitude of deference, folding their arms with slightly hunched shoulders. They were denied entry to hotels. These were at that time run by Lingayats and Brahmans but would generally not be frequented by people with high ritual and social status. The AKs were served outside on separate plates, which were stored on the thatched roofs of the shops. Water was served in coconut shells, later to be replaced with metal cups. They were responsible for washing their own utensils. Washermen have a status significantly higher than the ‘Untouchable’ castes, and so in Mahepura refused to serve them. This does not affect the washing of clothing, which the poor do themselves anyway, but people generally like to have their clothes ironed before a festival and go to the washerman for this. They were also barred from using the barber’s services, and so cut hair themselves, or, more recently, went to a barber’s shop in the taluk headquarters.

Able only to enter the compounds of temples, they would come to the edge of the buildings. They would venture no further than the point where other caste members remove their chappals, but would usually stand away from this place, keeping to a corner where they could be unobtrusive. They were not able to perform puja, and would not receive the holy water (*thīrtha*) that is given after puja. It was, however, at least sometimes possible for them to persuade a member of another caste to take puja articles for them into the temple, and if this were done they would receive prasad.

Women often stress that access to water was the most important of the prohibitions. In the 1940s there was just one well in Mahepura for drinking water. Upper castes, Brahmans and Shettys had preference in the use of this, followed by the other main castes. The AKs were not able to draw water themselves, but had their water containers filled by others. Later a separate well was sunk that was to be used exclusively by the AKs. These arrangements were challenged in the mid 1960. The catalyst for this was the then Gram Panchayat chairman, a Devanga, who led the AKs in a protest against prohibition on the use of the main village well and entry into tea shops. He gathered a large number of the AKs together and demanded their legal rights, by then long-standing but ineffective despite there being a police station in the village. It appears that, although others were reluctant to comply, the Devanga leader was a powerful man and they felt they had no choice. AKs who participated in this recall how the shop and hotel keepers resisted ‘internally’ (*valage, manasalli*); they suggest that some castes were more hostile to them than others, here Lingayats rather than Brahmans. The family of this Devanga leader is still close to the AKs today. Amongst them it was the young men who were active in this protest: those who were prominent then have become the more important figures in the colony now. Following this the washermen started to take work from the AKs. The barbers were not challenged because of the arrival of a barber from Andhra Pradesh who from the start accepted business from the AKs.
Now they also enter the tea shops and hotels, which are at present mostly owned by Devangas.

The case of temples is different because the majority are privately owned and so considered not to be covered by the anti-Untouchability legislation. The AKs do not attempt to enter these, and do not express any desire to do so: most have only a hazy idea of what temples there are in Mahepura. They mainly visit a temple to a local saint who died after Independence, which they have always been able to enter, perhaps because it is run by a Devanga-dominated committee. It is perhaps significant that this is a minor local deity and so rather less important than other gods. During fieldwork a Ganesh temple was opened, which also permits AK entry.

These changes have affected the younger generation more than their elders, many of whom continue to keep out of temples and also tea shops. They may even remain outside when others can be seen within, although at the temple they will now usually receive prasad and consecrated water. They fear that some calamity may befall both themselves and their colony if they transgress the rules of their childhood. Similar sentiments also linger over the drawing of water. Members of the middle castes do use the mini-tank positioned on the edge of the colony, approaching it by a route that avoids passing through the AK streets. The tank supplies water through three pipes around which people gather and wait. In an inchoate way, the non-AKs expect, without always demanding, some precedence here, and some are careful to avoid having their water containers come into contact with those of the AKs. The water does not flow for long enough for a segregated collection to take place, but the AKs feel that, again ‘internally’, the other castes would prefer it if that were possible.

People who wish to stress how thoroughgoing the decline of Untouchability is illustrate their point by referring to shop-keepers who used to require the AKs to stand away from their shops but now employ them to carry goods into their premises. However, the great majority of people will not allow AKs from Mahepura to enter their homes under any circumstances, and those that do allow them to enter do so only when there is work for them. They will no longer stand in the street and call out to attract the attention of someone in a house that they wish to speak to, but they do still squat at the doorstep rather than go inside a house. [...]

Being a Scheduled Caste

The Scheduled status of the Mahepura AKs, and the political action that led to it, have affected them in two ways. The name ‘AK’ is an abbreviation for Adi Karnataka, the form which is found on their SC certificates which entitle them to state benefits and provisions. It is not clear exactly when the term was introduced in Mahepura but it appears to be from around the time that the local Untouchability prohibitions were removed in the mid 1960s. Older people, including AKs themselves, still occasionally use what they describe as the ‘old names’, ‘Madiga’ and ‘Mannigar’, or less commonly still, ‘Edagai’ (Left Hand), even though use of these names is closely restricted by the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. The new name has spread with remarkable success. As noted earlier, when retelling orally transmitted caste stories even elderly men usually refer to themselves as AK, which means that they must have themselves exchanged the names in the version they learnt for the modern name. A part of the reason for the popularity of the term is that it is relatively value-free. All caste names carry with them connotations of a caste
stereotype, invariably painting a negative picture. The association is such that many are used in banter in a family or between friends: someone may be teased as being as mean as a Shetty, a member of the trading community, for example. The castes positioned towards the bottom of the hierarchy have names with a perhaps stronger pejorative force. To call someone a Madiga is to insult gravely. Younger men in Mahepura in particular are sensitive about the old names, being reluctant to say them and angry if they hear others use them. In a fierce argument I witnessed between a shopkeeper and his AK customer, the AK contemptuously uttered the shopkeeper's caste name, Shetty. This infuriated the shopkeeper, so much so that he had to be calmed down by his brother and some friends. Nonetheless he refrained from naming the man as an AK, let alone saying Madiga. There is a perception that the response of AKs and other SCs to trouble of this sort is always to interpret it as a case of Untouchability, and that so presented the law will always work in their favour. This creates a sense of caution amongst the other castes, as well as undercurrents of resentment. The notion that the law is misused by SCs and that it is unfair is very widespread. But it has helped to change in a short space of time basic norms of denotation.

[...] the status that the AKs have as SCs gives them a number of advantages over the rest of the population. These are a blessing and a curse, reducing material hardship but increasing consciousness of their dubious distinctiveness. Likewise, the renaming of their caste has allowed them to escape from names that double as popular insults in the non-AK world, but such special treatment comes at a price, again of emphasising that they are different from the other communities. As for current political struggle, there is little awareness. The Dalit Sangarsh Samiti (DSS) has only a nominal presence, and other organisations such as the Ambedkar Sangha none.

Religion of the village
The part played by Madigas in village religion has already been touched on in Armstrong's extract in the preceding section of this chapter, drawing on a study in Karnataka in 1995. This featured the festival of the village goddess and its buffalo sacrifice; his full discussion ranges more widely. This section begins with a report from a hundred years earlier but also from the area that would subsequently be included in Karnataka. It also begins the notice of Basavis important in this region.
In an exceedingly interesting account of the festival of the village goddess Ūramma, at Kudlgi in the Bellary district, Mr. F. Fawcett writes as follows.[f]

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The Madar community

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Serving the households means the right and responsibility to perform the agricultural labour they require, to remove their dead cattle, supplying chappals in return, and also to supply ropes. From the Madar point of view, it is the rights to labour which are of the greatest practical significance, a privilege in an otherwise competitive labour market; other tasks are now seen as mainly a trade-off for the privilege. Only about ten households now retain leather skills. The bābathu organisation allows these to fulfil obligations on behalf of the collectivity. In practice a few old men provide the occasional pair of chappals for those of their aged patrons who still like to wear such out-dated footwear. Of more relevance to most, labour also can be flexibly organised. It is performed by work-teams rather than individually, with the participation of those with the capacity and the opportunity. The system allows members of bana households with other demands on their time to be freed from any need to participate personally. Organising in this way has two main purposes: one is to avoid conflict and competition over employment opportunities, allowing adjustment to increasing socio-economic differentiation within the caste; the other is to preserve rights for caste members, rights which might otherwise be lost to others. Both are important for maintaining caste unity.

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For festivals, be they within the caste community or for the village as a whole, roles that have to be played by Madars are also the preserve of the Bhandara clan. Only if appropriate members are not available do others get a chance. Bhandaras are the priests, those charged with fetching the sacrificial animal, those making the sacrifice itself, and the devadasis who pronounce blessing ‘Udho! Udho!’. They also have the traditional role of beating the drums when the procession of the deity is taken out on the village's roads and when the image is worshipped in the temple for the village and other festivals.

For the village as a whole, three contrasting festivals are important, Basavanna Habba which is the festival to commemorate the birthday of Lord Basavanna, Marammana Habba for the leading village deity, and Pīrla Habba, a Muslim celebration. The close coexistence of Hindus, Lingayats and others, and Muslims is clearly expressed in the festivals. Each is held according to the rules of the particular religious group which owns it but people of all or both participate. Thus, during the last day of Moharram which is celebrated here as Pīrla Habba, the Lingayats and even the few Brahmans offer their worship after the Muslims and Pinjaras. The turn of the Madars comes at the end after every other caste has paid its respects. Hierarchy is exactly expressed on such occasions. If not by tradition, at least by practice, emphasis is put on communal rejoicing, with consumption of alcohol and much noisy dancing and singing. Each of the four liquor shops of the village is said to have a turnover of Rs. 40,000 on this last day of Moharram. The non-vegetarian and alcoholic castes take the lead, and the drinking is interpreted by others as encouraging Madar and Cheluvadi participation in this particular festival.

For Hindu events, the priests are Jangamas or Brahmans; Agasas spread the clean cloth for the chariot of the deity to proceed on; Koravas form the band; Voddas dig pits and erect poles; Cheluvadis carry the Cheluvadi battalu; Ganigas supply the oil for the lamps; and Madars are the drum beaters, though keeping their distance from both temple and procession. It is during the Maramma festival that they have their most important role to play. For this they must fetch the male buffalo (kōna), identified with the place from which it comes: when the festival was performed on the last day of 1992 it was ‘Kampli kōna’. It is washed and decorated with kumkum (vermilion), and a garland of red oleander flowers (kanigile) is put round its neck. The animal is symbolic of evil and it is therefore inauspicious flowers only which are used in its decoration. It is led round the village to allow every household to smear its neck with castor oil, and it is taken to the temple premises. It is the Madars who dig the pit in which it then stands ready to be sacrificed. Water is sprinkled on its head and the animal must shake it to associate itself with the sacrifice and give the signal for its own death. The priest of this temple is a Kuruba but it is a Madar who sacrifices the buffalo. Its head is cut off and its right leg put into its mouth.

Apart from these, the grandest and most revered festival is the jatra of Jade Thatha. This also has great importance for all castes and religious groups here. The life history of Thatha is rich with miracles he is supposed to have performed as part of his welfare measures and ideas of equality between castes. Born a Lingayat, he is supposed to have renounced worldly life to become an ascetic, wandering from village to village, eating in a

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For Hindu events, the priests are Jangamas or Brahmans; Agasas spread the clean cloth for the chariot of the deity to proceed on; Koravas form the band; Voddas dig pits and erect poles; Cheluvadis carry the Cheluvadi battalu; Ganigas supply the oil for the lamps; and Madars are the drum beaters, though keeping their distance from both temple and procession. It is during the Maramma festival that they have their most important role to play. For this they must fetch the male buffalo (kōna), identified with the place from which it comes: when the festival was performed on the last day of 1992 it was ‘Kampli kōna’. It is washed and decorated with kumkum (vermilion), and a garland of red oleander flowers (kanigile) is put round its neck. The animal is symbolic of evil and it is therefore inauspicious flowers only which are used in its decoration.(7) It is led round the village to allow every household to smear its neck with castor oil, and it is taken to the temple premises. It is the Madars who dig the pit in which it then stands ready to be sacrificed. Water is sprinkled on its head and the animal must shake it to associate itself with the sacrifice and give the signal for its own death. The priest of this temple is a Kuruba but it is a Madar who sacrifices the buffalo. Its head is cut off and its right leg put into its mouth [see previous extracts also].

Religion of the village

The part played by Madigas in village religion has already been touched on in Armstrong's extract in the preceding section of this chapter, drawing on a study in Karnataka in 1995. This featured the festival of the village goddess and its buffalo sacrifice; his full discussion ranges more widely. This section begins with a report from a hundred years earlier but also from the area that would subsequently be included in Karnataka. It also begins the notice of Basavisse important in this region.


In an exceedingly interesting account of the festival of the village goddess Ūramma, at Kudligi in the Bellary district, Mr. F. Fawcett writes as follows.[f] The Mādiga Basivis (dedicated prostitutes) are given alms, and join in the procession. A quantity of rice and ragi flour is poured into a basket, over which one of the village servants cuts the throat of a small black ram. The carcase is laid on the bloody flour, and the whole covered with old cloths, and placed on the head of a Mādiga, who stands for some time in front of the goddess. The goddess is then carried a few yards, the Mādiga walking in front, while a hole is dug close to her, and the basket of bloody flour and the ram’s carcase are buried. After some dancing by the Mādiga Basivis to the music of the tom-tom, the Mādigas bring five new pots, and worship them. A buffalo, devoted to the goddess after the last
festival, is then driven or dragged through the village with shouting and tom-toming, walked round the temple, and beheaded by the Mādiga in front of the goddess. The head is placed in front of her with the right foreleg in the mouth, and a lamp, lighted eight days previously, is placed on top. All then start in procession round the village, a Mādiga, naked but for a few margosa (Melia Azadirachta) leaves, and held by two others, leading the way. Behind him are all the other Mādigas, carrying six hundred seers of chōlum (Sorghum: millet), which they scatter; and, following them, all the other villagers. It is daybreak, and the Mādiga who led the way, the pūjari (priest) and the women who followed him, who have been fasting for more than twenty-four hours, now eat. The Mādiga is fed. This Mādiga is said to be in mortal terror while leading the procession, for the spirit or influence of the goddess comes over him. He swoons before the procession is completed. At noon the people collect again at Ūramma’s temple, where a purchased buffalo is sacrificed. The head is placed in front of the goddess as before, and removed at once for food. Then those of the lower Südra castes, and Mādigas who are under vows, come dressed in margosa leaves, with lamps on their heads, and sacrifice buffaloes, sheep and goats to the goddess.

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‘Nuliyur’ is the pseudonym of a large and complex village, also in Bellary district of Karnataka and with a population of about 11,000 at the time it was studied in 1995. The research there was part of the same comparative study of seven Scheduled Caste communities from which Armstrong’s extracts above are taken. Here the focus is on Madars, unlike the AKs of Mahepura still apparently content with their long-standing variant of the ancient Madiga name. Their creative way of handling once hereditary labour relationships is also included in the extract here.

[pp 112-22]

The Madar community

The Madars' separate section, generally called 'Madar ōni' (lane or quarter), lies to the north of the main village. The area was earlier mānya, land allocated for the support of the main mosque standing nearby and which therefore belonged to the Muslims. Their rights were bought out by government after Independence and the land was distributed as house sites to Madars and Cheluvadis. The Madar section is clearly separate, with its own entrances, three in number, and its own independent alignment of houses and lanes. Its 265 houses put Madars, with the Pinjaras and Barikes, amongst the largest caste communities in the village after the Lingayats themselves. The quarter adjoins the Cheluvadis' but is clearly divided off from all others. On one side is a graveyard, on another manure pits, on another the area reserved for toilet use and a major sewage gutter. Opposite the main entrance, which leads in from one of the minor roads out of the village, stands the mosque, with the houses of Pinjaras behind it.

[...] The Madar ward shares, however, a pattern common in others. A temple and often the house of the elder of the clan which is linked to its deity form the nucleus. They are surrounded by the houses of other relatives. Physical amenities like wells, lights and taps cluster close to the house of the elder, and the very few who have been able to benefit in their housing from government schemes mostly belong to this same section of the population. In the Madar ward there are six temples, each having rows of houses around them. The oldest are those of Mānkalamma, Durgevva, Kenchamma and Maramma, and it is the houses of the original clan of this caste community, the Bhandara bedagu, which are located around these temples. The Aiholeru, Bannelloru, Kolumeru and other clans are from outside the village, having immigrated to Nuliyur at different times in its history. They have residences in different parts of the ward, sometimes around a small temple of their own deity.
According to Kurubas, Madars have lived for many centuries in the village, dependent particularly on occupations related to dead buffaloes. They have removed them for their owners, skinned them, tanned the hides, and prepared various items of leather for military, agricultural and domestic use. In the great days of the past they are said to have made the saddles and harness for horses and elephants, weapon bags for soldiers, belts, large bags (kapile) for lifting water from irrigation wells, and other items all from buffalo leather. Such distant memories come from the Kurubas; Madars themselves remember only that their ancestors made leather goods for the caste Hindus in return for food grains. They also remember their own and their elders' experiences as jīthālu bonded labourers, and the immigrations and emigration from time to time necessitated by poverty and hardship caused by drought.

Discussion of such topics invariably shifts towards their problems of earning a livelihood and to the famous Lingayat saint, Jade Thatha. He is thought to have lived about two hundred years ago and to have tried to reform others' attitudes towards Madars. By them he is worshipped for the gift of rope-making from sisal (kathāle), which has kept them alive in hard times when no other employment has been available. They have converted the tragedy of such situations into a pride that no-one else in the village can make such ropes. They are made just before and during the rainy season when there is not sufficient agricultural work. It sustains many households during the slack season before harvest. To Jade Thatha they owe it that no snake or scorpion will bite a Madar when he or she goes to cut the sisal leaves.

Almost all Madar households depend heavily on wage labour in agriculture to eke out a living. They carry out the tasks of preparing the land, sowing, transplanting and weeding. At harvest it was their responsibility in the traditional division of labour to reap, while the Cheluvadis undertook the operations of the threshing floor. Other kinds of casual or contract labour are also undertaken by men. A few, regarded as particularly brave and strong, work as porters (hamālis), loading and unloading vehicles and carrying goods to their destinations, a few in individual enterprises such as chappal repair or blacksmith work or carpentry, and there are also a few in skilled employment locally, such as tractor drivers. Government employment of any kind is rare.

A striking feature of Madar life is the way traditional work of the caste is collectively organised. In the village at large indeed, as has been seen, caste and clan still pattern economic activity to a marked degree. Inter-relations between the community and the larger society in the village are shaped first by bābathu relations with the upper castes. These are the right of the members of the original clan, the Bhandaras. Households entitled to serve are divided into four named groups (banas, shoulders, or tholu, arms), each with a leader from a particular family of the clan. Patron households, those with land or farming on their own account, are listed, in consultation with upper caste leaders, and then divided into four equal sets. Code numbers for these are written on four chits of paper and these are placed inside the sanctuary of the temple. A child is then asked to draw them in the form of a lottery, so allocating a set of patrons to each bana. Each abides by the results and serves the households allocated to it for a period of three or five years, on completion of which, new lists are drawn up. The object is to balance out over time costs and benefits from the variations amongst patrons which cannot be altogether equalised.

Serving the households means the right and responsibility to perform the agricultural labour they require, to remove their dead cattle, supplying chappals in return, and also to supply ropes. From the Madar point of view, it is the rights to labour which are of the greatest practical significance, a privilege in an otherwise competitive labour market; other tasks are now seen as mainly a trade-off for the privilege. Only about ten households now retain leather skills. The bābathu organisation allows these to fulfil obligations on behalf of the collectivity. In practice a few old men provide the
occasional pair of chappals for those of their aged patrons who still like to wear such out-dated footwear. Of more relevance to most, labour also can be flexibly organised. It is performed by work-teams rather than individually, with the participation of those with the capacity and the opportunity. The system allows members of *bana* households with other demands on their time to be freed from any need to participate personally. Organising in this way has two main purposes: one is to avoid conflict and competition over employment opportunities, allowing adjustment to increasing socio-economic differentiation within the caste; the other is to preserve rights for caste members, rights which might otherwise be lost to others. Both are important for maintaining caste unity.

Removing dead cattle is a service offered to members of all castes including the Koravas but excepting the Cheluvas: Madars consider them inferior and call them by the same name as do all other castes, Begar, which they find disrespectful. The animal is removed to a special location for skinning. Eight men are required to carry a large buffalo corpse and they are to be paid Rs. 4 each. The meat is, Madars assert, discarded for dogs and crows, not eaten as the upper castes believe them to be doing. The skin may be sold to Muslim traders who sell it on to Kampli, the nearest larger centre. Neither tanning nor using the leather to make footwear and other items is now usually undertaken; if leather is required for chappals to be made in return, specially if a patron household demands more than the token one pair, it is likely to have to be bought, again from Kampli, necessitating money costs not only for the leather but for the return bus journey.

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Apart from these, the grandest and most revered festival is the jatra of Jade Thatha. This also has great importance for all castes and religious groups here. The life history of Thatha is rich with miracles he is supposed to have performed as part of his welfare measures and ideas of equality between castes. Born a Lingayat, he is supposed to have renounced worldly life to become an ascetic, wandering from village to village, eating in any household irrespective of caste or religion. When he came to the Madar quarter of Nuliyur, he is supposed to have requested food and to have eaten whatever the poor Madars ate. Then, it is said, the daughters-in-law - the daughters are expected to be more restrained and proper and not to talk to elders - teased him saying that he never gave them any gift, though they fed him at the cost of their own starvation. The saint is supposed to have pulled out a few strands of hair from his beard and to have given them to the women telling them that they could live on that. Subsequently, when the women invented the art of making ropes from the sisal plant, they attributed it to Thatha, the strands of his grey beard resembling the fibre discovered. Sisal rope-making they therefore consider to be the gift of Thatha.

He is also said to have been punished by his own Lingayat caste for his infringement of rules of commensality by being confined, living, in a tomb-like underground granary. There, by the light of the lamp which is always placed in a tomb, he wrote the scripture which is still read today.(8) Jade Thatha is thus part of the mythology, not only of the village as a whole, or of those discriminated against and excluded, but of the Madars here particularly. They, like everyone else, have great faith in his blessings. They go to the mutt in large numbers every Monday evening, the auspicious day to worship him. The Purana or the life history of Thatha is supposed to contain many episodes where the high values of Madars and equality of castes are referred to, but they blame the Lingayats for hiding these portions. He is believed to have prescribed that, on the first day of his Jatra, the food cooked by and out of the contributions of the Madars should first be served to all the devotees, before using the contributions of other castes. This is called 'Haralaiana Puje', Haralaiah being the early Vīrashaiva saint, said here to have been of Madar caste (see Ashok Kumar 1998a). The injunction is followed to the extent that food grains and other items are collected from the Madars, but they are cooked by Lingayats. The offerings of Madars are received by the priest, who is a Ganiga Lingayat and descendant of Thatha himself, outside the Mutt. All others except the Cheluvadis may enter to view the image of Thatha and his grandson. The Madars, however, despite their special connections with the saint, are refused all entry to the Mutt even on this day.
One cult is distinctive among Madars, though again it is firmly grounded within a Vīrashaiva context. This is the order of the Guruputra (fem. guruputri) makkalu. The term literally means 'children of the children of teachers'. It refers to those who have received initiation or ordination (dīkṣa) directly or indirectly from the Swamiji of a Lingayat mutt. The desire to become a guruputra comes from within the person, but only those deemed suitable will be initiated. They must want to relinquish all worldly passions and to take up a pious life. Those ordained wear a necklace of rudrakshi beads.

One such is Basappa, who is in the service of the Mahantha Swami, the senior religious authority for the Lingayats in the village and the neighbourhood. He is the head of the Mahantina mutt, mentioned above, which stands beside the Sri Basavanna temple in Basavannapete. On the other side of it is the still empty samadhi sthala for the Swamiji. There is the tradition among Lingayats that their swamijis are buried alive when they decide to relinquish their lives. They are termed 'Echcha marani', one who dies when he desires to do so. The belief is that the swamijis would know that their end has come and announce it formally. At this stage, they would be ceremonially led to the samadhi sthala, a living tomb which would have been built already, and there left to die. Such a tomb is like a temple in its gopuram and general form, raised above a shaft and cave underground, where the pītha ('throne') of stone is built for the swamiji to sit on as he dies. After his death, the chamber would be walled up. Nowadays he is not expected actually to take samadhi when alive, but the tomb is nevertheless built and kept ready. Basappa, the Madar man, looks after the still empty tomb which thus awaits the Mahantha Swami, and works on the mutt's land. His duties include cleaning the outer premises as well as the tomb itself. Since the latter is not yet occupied by the Swamiji, his entry is not considered polluting.

No-one in the Madar quarter knows exactly why or how the Swamiji picked Basappa for his personal service, but the story is told of his father being in the service of the same aged Swamiji when he was young and once discovering an earthen pot containing 'naga and nanya', meaning gold coins and jewellery. He promptly took the pot to the Swamiji. It is thought that perhaps as a mark of appreciation of the sincerity of his father, the Swamiji himself initiated him as a Guruputra. His ordination by the chief seer is considered to make him superior to those initiated by gurus who are themselves Madars. He is religious in his daily habits, avoiding both pork and beef, bathing daily and applying vibhuti of sacred ash to his forehead. He does not take on any polluting kind of employment.

Basappa is therefore a superior kind of guruputra. Others have been ordained by senior guruputras living in other villages or taluks. There are about sixteen of them in the quarter, woman as well as men. In many cases, both husband and wife have been ordained. They continue to live together in the same house; celibacy is not required, but the women should have reached their menopause. The belief is that a philosophical bent of mind begins to occur at that time, and that it helps the women to be in the company of men who are also guruputras. They are not required to be teetotallers, but austere living, cleanliness, regular worship of their family deity, a sacrificial nature shown by compassion for the poor and needy, and qualities of dāna or giving are all expected of them. They sing bhajans through the night, and are invited to Madar houses for the celebration of births, marriages and deaths. Both widows and former devadasis are often guruputris. The daily life of these holy men and women among the Madars consists of non-earning activities which suit their generally old age. At their death they are not buried the way other Madars are. Instead, the funeral ceremonies resemble those conducted for Lingayats and their Jangams in particular. A priest or swami comes to officiate during the death ceremony: a pit (mane guni) is dug and a rough four-legged seat placed in a cave within it, on which the body is sat for burial. It is said that the deceased is being given a samadhi sthala, just as a Jangam swami is given when he dies.
Association with holy Lingayats in a life of respectability and pious character, and the status deriving from that, are the objects of ordination for Madars. The presence of a Guruputra in the household is seen as a matter for reverence by fellow Madars. There are cases where the sons pressurise parents to live as guruputras, particularly if the mother is a devadasi. One such case was noted where two sons were settled in Bombay as dock workers. Their father died as a Guruputra in 1993 and was given a samadhi sthala; their mother was then forced to continue in her Guruputri life-style, since the sons wanted the family's special status maintained. She had no objection but for the fact that there was no-one to support her in the village. She was not expected to work for others but to lead a life of purity, worship and pilgrimage, or at least to attend the singing of bhajans in the nearby village where their guru lived. Her sons did not send her money regularly, and she had to live on alms from people of other castes, but without formally begging, since this is not permitted for Guruputra/ís. She was, that is to say, on her own to pay the price for raising their self-esteem and their value in the eyes of the community.

The devadasis are another group amongst Madars who have distinctive roles in the economic and religious activities of the village as a whole. The two orders - guruputras and devadasis - are not comparable in many respects: the latter as an order is apparently more ancient and its members are more numerous and cut across castes. Locally there are devadasis amongst the Cheluvadis and the Barikes and perhaps other low castes too. Here girls were in the past dedicated on the full-moon day in Vaisakha month (April-May) to the goddess Huligamma at Munirabad near Hospet, the taluk headquarters. Those so dedicated are known as lesis or sometimes jogammnas, a commoner term elsewhere for a similar dedicated role. There were one hundred and twenty in the Madar quarter alone at the time of this study.

The ceremonial duties of a lesi are integrated into the socio-cultural and religious life of the people in the village. It is characteristic here that the deities of all castes, irrespective of whether they are low or high, are revered and worshipped by the villagers on occasions in the calendar of festivals. Thus, every god or goddess of the village, every Sadhu or Saint, Swami or Muslim Pir, receives their due respect. There are days in the calendar when special worship and mass feeding are arranged in the respective shrines or mutts or temples/mosques of these gods and holy men. As is common elsewhere, the agricultural round also creates occasions for performing customary worship, addressed to the agricultural implements, or in the form of prayers to the rain god, before starting sowing, at the harvest, etc. These and life-cycle ceremonies, village and other festivals all necessitate the presence of a lesi to perform the sāki haryodu ritual. She is expected to sanctify the occasion by carrying the hadalige of Goddess Huligamma, a basket in which the goddess is represented by a kalasha, a small brass pot with strings of pearls (muttu) placed in its neck. For a typical domestic ceremony, an elevated place in the house is cleaned and purified with cowdung solution. This is called gadduge. The hadalige is placed here and worshipped by the lesi first, and then by the women of the household. She carries with her a pot of holy water (thīrtha) which is sprinkled on the people and the house or place as a gesture of purification: earlier country liquor is said to have been used. As she sprinkles the liquid, she utters the words ‘Udho! Udho!’ In return for her services, the lesi is paid two betel leaves, two arecanut pieces, a measure of jowar and a few rupees. If the household is rich, she may get a blouse piece and a little more money.

The lesis were therefore an important integrating element in religious life across all the boundaries of caste. In the past the inter-caste sexual relationships formed by the lesi’s role, as by other devadasis, have had other important integrative effects too. When long-standing and exclusive relationships with single protectors were common, lesis might be able to obtain favours such as jobs in upper-caste households for their sons. There are cases of devadasis, now old, who in the past were able to procure land titles, or save their families from distress sales. Some have encouraged their sons to learn the occupation of their fathers. There are Madar barbers who were born to
Lingayat Hadapad men and devadasi women. The smith already mentioned learnt his craft from his mother's paramour (cf. Parvathamma 1971: 65-7). However, at least since 1984 devadasi initiation has been clearly illegal,(12) and at the same time, more or less fleeting and promiscuous relationships have become the norm. Local Madar youths claim that since the mid 1980s there has not been a single dedication of a Madar girl to Huligamma. Official schemes for the rehabilitation of the devadasis have had a marked effect locally. Activists of the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi (DSS) at Kampli and elsewhere have sensitised the Madars of Nuliyur to the problems and possibilities here, and members of the Ambedkar Sangha in the village have launched a programme to put a halt to the practice. Even otherwise, the women, in particular those who have been themselves lesis and are now insecure in old age, without a husband to take care of them, endorse the views of youth in condemning the practice as bad and exploitative.(13)

Apart from these, the grandest and most revered festival is the jatra of Jade Thatha. This also has great importance for all castes and religious groups here. The life history of Thatha is rich with miracles he is supposed to have performed as part of his welfare measures and ideas of equality between castes. Born a Lingayat, he is supposed to have renounced worldly life to become an ascetic, wandering from village to village, eating in any household irrespective of caste or religion. When he came to the Madar quarter of Nuliyur, he is supposed to have requested food and to have eaten whatever the poor Madars ate. Then, it is said, the daughters-in-law - the daughters are expected to be more restrained and proper and not to talk to elders - teased him saying that he never gave them any gift, though they fed him at the cost of their own starvation. The saint is supposed to have pulled out a few strands of hair from his beard and to have given them to the women telling them that they could live on that. Subsequently, when the women invented the art of making ropes from the sisal plant, they attributed it to Thatha, the strands of his grey beard resembling the fibre discovered. Sisal rope-making they therefore consider to be the gift of Thatha.

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e are divided into four named groups (*banas*, shoulders, or *tholu*, arms), each with a leader from a particular family of the clan. Patron households, those with land or farming on their own account, are listed, in consultation with upper caste leaders, and then divided into four equal sets. Code numbers for these are written on four chits of paper and these are placed inside the sanctuary of the temple. A child is then asked to draw them in the form of a lottery, so allocating a set of patrons to each *bana*. Each abides by the results and serves the households allocated to it for a period of three or five years, on completion of which, new lists are drawn up. The object is to balance out over time costs and benefits from the variations amongst patrons which cannot be altogether equalised.[h]
Serving the households means the right and responsibility to perform the agricultural labour they require, to remove their dead cattle, supplying chappals in return, and also to supply ropes. From the Madar point of view, it is the rights to labour which are of the greatest practical significance, a privilege in an otherwise competitive labour market; other tasks are now seen as mainly a trade-off for the privilege. Only about ten households now retain leather skills. The bābathu organisation allows these to fulfil obligations on behalf of the collectivity. In practice a few old men provide the occasional pair of chappals for those of their aged patrons who still like to wear such out-dated footwear. Of more relevance to most, labour also can be flexibly organised. It is performed by work-teams rather than individually, with the participation of those with the capacity and the opportunity. The system allows members of bana households with other demands on their time to be freed from any need to participate personally. Organising in this way has two main purposes: one is to avoid conflict and competition over employment opportunities, allowing adjustment to increasing socio-economic differentiation within the caste; the other is to preserve rights for caste members, rights which might otherwise be lost to others. Both are important for maintaining caste unity.

Removing dead cattle is a service offered to members of all castes including the Koravas but excepting the Cheluvadis: Madars consider them inferior and call them by the same name as do all other castes, Begar, which they find disrespectful. The animal is removed to a special location for skinning. Eight men are required to carry a large buffalo corpse and they are to be paid Rs. 4 each. The meat is, Madars assert, discarded for dogs and crows, not eaten as the upper castes believe them to be doing. The skin may be sold to Muslim traders who sell it on to Kampli, the nearest larger centre. Neither tanning nor using the leather to make footwear and other items is now usually undertaken; if leather is required for chappals to be made in return, specially if a patron household demands more than the token one pair, it is likely to have to be bought, again from Kampli, necessitating money costs not only for the leather but for the return bus journey.

The elder of the Madar ward heads all the clans and banas, though each also has its own elder or head. He is responsible for making available the services of his caste members in agriculture and other production processes, in the religious events of the village, for births and deaths, marriages and any other associated work for patron households. He takes decisions on behalf of his caste, and his decisions are final when it comes to celebration of events within the quarter associated with life ceremonies, festivals, employment and division of labour. For the conduct of caste festivals and the role of other elders and people in them, important decisions include the date and the amount to be spent, whether a sacrifice needs to be made, and indeed how prepared the caste group is for celebrating, especially whether financial and other resources are available. For apportioning the contributions to be made to their own service caste, the Dakklas - to be discussed below - his decision is also crucial.

For festivals, be they within the caste community or for the village as a whole, roles that have to be played by Madars are also the preserve of the Bhandara clan. Only if appropriate members are not available do others get a chance.(5) Bhandaras are the priests, those charged with fetching the sacrificial animal, those making the sacrifice itself, and the devadasis who pronounce blessing ‘Udho! Udho!’.(6) They also have the traditional role of beating the drums when the procession of the deity is taken out on the village's roads and when the image is worshipped in the temple for the village and other festivals.

For the village as a whole, three contrasting festivals are important, Basavanna Habba which is the festival to commemorate the birthday of Lord Basavanna, Marammana Habba for the leading village deity, and Pīrla Habba, a Muslim celebration. The close coexistence of Hindus, Lingayats
and others, and Muslims is clearly expressed in the festivals. Each is held according to the rules of
the particular religious group which owns it but people of all or both participate. Thus, during the
last day of Moharram which is celebrated here as Pīrla Habba, the Lingayats and even the few
Brahmans offer their worship after the Muslims and Pinjaras. The turn of the Madars comes at the
end after every other caste has paid its respects. Hierarchy is exactly expressed on such occasions. If
not by tradition, at least by practice, emphasis is put on communal rejoicing, with consumption of
alcohol and much noisy dancing and singing. Each of the four liquor shops of the village is said to
have a turnover of Rs. 40,000 on this last day of Moharram. The non-vegetarian and alcoholic
castes take the lead, and the drinking is interpreted by others as encouraging Madar and Cheluvadi
participation in this particular festival.

For Hindu events, the priests are Jangamas or Brahmans; Agasas spread the clean cloth for the
chariot of the deity to proceed on; Koravas form the band; Voddas dig pits and erect poles;
Cheluvadis carry the Cheluvadi battalu; Ganigas supply the oil for the lamps; and Madars are the
drum beaters, though keeping their distance from both temple and procession. It is during the
Maramma festival that they have their most important role to play. For this they must fetch the male
buffalo (kōna), identified with the place from which it comes: when the festival was performed on
the last day of 1992 it was ‘Kampli kōna’. It is washed and decorated with kumkum (vermilion),
and a garland of red oleander flowers (kanigile) is put round its neck. The animal is symbolic of evil
and it is therefore inauspicious flowers only which are used in its decoration.(7) It is led round the
village to allow every household to smear its neck with castor oil, and it is taken to the temple
premises. It is the Madars who dig the pit in which it then stands ready to be sacrificed. Water is
sprinkled on its head and the animal must shake it to associate itself with the sacrifice and give the
signal for its own death. The priest of this temple is a Kuruba but it is a Madar who sacrifices the
buffalo. Its head is cut off and its right leg put into its mouth [see previous extracts also].

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He is also said to have been punished by his own Lingayat caste for his infringement of rules of
commensality by being confined, living, in a tomb-like underground granary. There, by the light of
the lamp which is always placed in a tomb, he wrote the scripture which is still read today.(8) Jade
Thatha is thus part of the mythology, not only of the village as a whole, or of those discriminated
against and excluded, but of the Madars here particularly. They, like everyone else, have great faith
in his blessings. They go to the mutt in large numbers every Monday evening, the auspicious day to
worship him. The Purana or the life history of Thatha is supposed to contain many episodes where
the high values of Madars and equality of castes are referred to, but they blame the Lingayats for
hiding these portions. He is believed to have prescribed that, on the first day of his Jatra, the food
cooked by and out of the contributions of the Madars should first be served to all the devotees,
before using the contributions of other castes. This is called 'Haralaiana Puje', Haralaiah being the
early Vīrashaiva saint, said here to have been of Madar caste (see Ashok Kumar 1998a). The injunction is followed to the extent that food grains and other items are collected from the Madars, but they are cooked by Lingayats. The offerings of Madars are received by the priest, who is a Ganiga Lingayat and descendant of Thatha himself, outside the Mutt. All others except the Cheluvadis may enter to view the image of Thatha and his grandson. The Madars, however, despite their special connections with the saint, are refused all entry to the Mutt even on this day.

One cult is distinctive among Madars, though again it is firmly grounded within a Vīrashaiva context. This is the order of the Guruputra (fem. guruputri) makkalu. The term literally means 'children of the children of teachers'. It refers to those who have received initiation or ordination (dīkṣa) directly or indirectly from the Swamiji of a Lingayat mutt. The desire to become a guruputra comes from within the person, but only those deemed suitable will be initiated. They must want to relinquish all worldly passions and to take up a pious life. Those ordained wear a necklace of rudrakshi beads.

One such is Basappa, who is in the service of the Mahantha Swami, the senior religious authority for the Lingayats in the village and the neighbourhood. He is the head of the Mahantina mutt, mentioned above, which stands beside the Sri Basavanna temple in Basavannapete. On the other side of it is the still empty samadhi sthala for the Swamiji. There is the tradition among Lingayats that their swamijis are buried alive when they decide to relinquish their lives. They are termed 'Echcha maranī', one who dies when he desires to do so. The belief is that the swamijis would know that their end has come and announce it formally. At this stage, they would be ceremonially led to the samadhi sthala, a living tomb which would have been built already, and there left to die. Such a tomb is like a temple in its gopuram and general form, raised above a shaft and cave underground, where the pītha ('throne') of stone is built for the swamiji to sit on as he dies. After his death, the chamber would be walled up. Nowadays he is not expected actually to take samadhi when alive, but the tomb is nevertheless built and kept ready. Basappa, the Madar man, looks after the still empty tomb which thus awaits the Mahantha Swami, and works on the mutt's land. His duties include cleaning the outer premises as well as the tomb itself. Since the latter is not yet occupied by the Swamiji, his entry is not considered polluting.

No-one in the Madar quarter knows exactly why or how the Swamiji picked Basappa for his personal service, but the story is told of his father being in the service of the same aged Swamiji when he was young and once discovering an earthen pot containing 'naga and nanya', meaning gold coins and jewellery. He promptly took the pot to the Swamiji. It is thought that perhaps as a mark of appreciation of the sincerity of his father, the Swamiji himself initiated him as a Guruputra. His ordination by the chief seer is considered to make him superior to those initiated by gurus who are themselves Madars. He is religious in his daily habits, avoiding both pork and beef, bathing daily and applying vibhuti of sacred ash to his forehead. He does not take on any polluting kind of employment.

Basappa is therefore a superior kind of guruputra. Others have been ordained by senior guruputras living in other villages or taluks. There are about sixteen of them in the quarter, woman as well as men. In many cases, both husband and wife have been ordained. They continue to live together in the same house; celibacy is not required, but the women should have reached their menopause. The belief is that a philosophical bent of mind begins to occur at that time, and that it helps the women to be in the company of men who are also guruputras. They are not required to be teetotallers, but austere living, cleanliness, regular worship of their family deity, a sacrificial nature shown by compassion for the poor and needy, and qualities of dāna or giving are all expected of them. They sing bhajans through the night, and are invited to Madar houses for the celebration of births, marriages and deaths. Both widows and former devadasis are often guruputris. The daily life of
these holy men and women among the Madars consists of non-earning activities which suit their generally old age. At their death they are not buried the way other Madars are. Instead, the funeral ceremonies resemble those conducted for Lingayats and their Jangams in particular. A priest or swami comes to officiate during the death ceremony: a pit (mane guni) is dug and a rough four-legged seat placed in a cave within it, on which the body is sat for burial. It is said that the deceased is being given a samadhi sthala, just as a Jangam swami is given when he dies.

Association with holy Lingayats in a life of respectability and pious character, and the status deriving from that, are the objects of ordination for Madars. The presence of a Guruputra in the household is seen as a matter for reverence by fellow Madars. There are cases where the sons pressurise parents to live as guruputras, particularly if the mother is a devadasi. One such case was noted where two sons were settled in Bombay as dock workers. Their father died as a Guruputra in 1993 and was given a samadhi sthala; their mother was then forced to continue in her Guruputri life-style, since the sons wanted the family's special status maintained. She had no objection but for the fact that there was no-one to support her in the village. She was not expected to work for others but to lead a life of purity, worship and pilgrimage, or at least to attend the singing of bhajans in the nearby village where their guru lived. Her sons did not send her money regularly, and she had to live on alms from people of other castes, but without formally begging, since this is not permitted for Guruputra/is. She was, that is to say, on her own to pay the price for raising their self-esteem and their value in the eyes of the community.

The devadasis are another group amongst Madars who have distinctive roles in the economic and religious activities of the village as a whole. The two orders - guruputras and devadasis - are not comparable in many respects: the latter as an order is apparently more ancient and its members are more numerous and cut across castes. Locally there are devadasis amongst the Cheluvadis and the Barikes and perhaps other low castes too. Here girls were in the past dedicated on the full-moon day in Vaisakha month (April-May) to the goddess Huligamma at Munirabad near Hospet, the taluk headquarters. Those so dedicated are known as lesis or sometimes jogammas, a commoner term elsewhere for a similar dedicated role. There were one hundred and twenty in the Madar quarter alone at the time of this study.

The ceremonial duties of a lesi are integrated into the socio-cultural and religious life of the people in the village. It is characteristic here that the deities of all castes, irrespective of whether they are low or high, are revered and worshipped by the villagers on occasions in the calendar of festivals. Thus, every god or goddess of the village, every Sadhu or Saint, Swami or Muslim Pir, receives their due respect. There are days in the calendar when special worship and mass feeding are arranged in the respective shrines or mutts or temples/mosques of these gods and holy men. As is common elsewhere, the agricultural round also creates occasions for performing customary worship, addressed to the agricultural implements, or in the form of prayers to the rain god, before starting sowing, at the harvest, etc. These and life-cycle ceremonies, village and other festivals all necessitate the presence of a lesi to perform the sâki har yodu ritual. She is expected to sanctify the occasion by carrying the hadalige of Goddess Huligamma, a basket in which the goddess is represented by a kalasha, a small brass pot with strings of pearls (muttu) placed in its neck. For a typical domestic ceremony, an elevated place in the house is cleaned and purified with cowdung solution. This is called gadduge. The hadalige is placed here and worshipped by the lesi first, and then by the women of the household. She carries with her a pot of holy water (thîrtha) which is sprinkled on the people and the house or place as a gesture of purification: earlier country liquor is said to have been used. As she sprinkles the liquid, she utters the words ‘Udho! Udho!’ In return for her services, the lesi is paid two betel leaves, two arecanut pieces, a measure of jowar and a few rupees. If the household is rich, she may get a blouse piece and a little more money.
The *lesi* were therefore an important integrating element in religious life across all the boundaries of caste. In the past the inter-caste sexual relationships formed by the *lesi*’s role, as by other devadasis, have had other important integrative effects too. When long-standing and exclusive relationships with single protectors were common, *lesi* might be able to obtain favours such as jobs in upper-caste households for their sons. There are cases of devadasis, now old, who in the past were able to procure land titles, or save their families from distress sales. Some have encouraged their sons to learn the occupation of their fathers. There are Madar barbers who were born to Lingayat Hadapad men and devadasi women. The smith already mentioned learnt his craft from his mother’s paramour (cf. Parvathamma 1971: 65-7). However, at least since 1984 devadasi initiation has been clearly illegal,(12) and at the same time, more or less fleeting and promiscuous relationships have become the norm. Local Madar youths claim that since the mid 1980s there has not been a single dedication of a Madar girl to Huligamma. Official schemes for the rehabilitation of the devadasis have had a marked effect locally. Activists of the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi (DSS) at Kampli and elsewhere have sensitised the Madars of Nuliyur to the problems and possibilities here, and members of the Ambedkar Sangha in the village have launched a programme to put a halt to the practice. Even otherwise, the women, in particular those who have been themselves *lesi* and are now insecure in old age, without a husband to take care of them, endorse the views of youth in condemning the practice as bad and exploitative.(13)