
RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE MADIGA COMMUNITY: EVIDENCE FROM INSCRIPTIONS, LITERATURE, HERO STONES AND FOLK TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The history of India has traditionally been narrated largely through the political activities of kings, dynasties, wars, territorial expansion, religious institutions and royal patronage. As a consequence, the lives and contributions of socially marginalised communities have received comparatively limited attention in mainstream historical narratives. The history of the Madiga community provides an important example of this historiographical gap. The present study attempts to examine the historical presence and contributions of the Madigas through literary references, inscriptions, hero stones, legends, oral traditions and local cultural practices. Particular attention is given to the historical use of the terms *Matanga* and *Matangi*, references to Madigas in inscriptions, their reported participation in military activities, and the traditions surrounding Madiga heroes and martyrs. The study also examines examples from the Chitradurga region, including the traditions associated with Bandamma, Iranna, Sravanappa, Eranna (Veeraguddanna) and Madigara Siddha. These accounts indicate that members of the Madiga community were represented in diverse historical and social roles, including soldiers, military leaders, fort guards, water carriers, village servants, local officials and community heroes. The study argues that inscriptions, literary works, hero stones and folk traditions can provide valuable alternative sources for reconstructing the histories of communities whose contributions have remained underrepresented in conventional historical writing. At the same time, oral traditions and etymological claims require critical comparison with independently verifiable historical evidence.

KEYWORDS: Madiga, Matanga, Matangi, Dalit history, inscriptions, hero stones, folk literature, oral tradition, Chitradurga, social history.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical writing has traditionally concentrated on rulers, dynasties, wars, political institutions, royal donations and territorial expansion. Such an approach often gives relatively little space to the everyday lives and contributions of ordinary people and socially marginalised communities. The historical record of the Madigas is particularly significant in this context because their social position frequently resulted in their contributions being overlooked or represented primarily through the lens of caste hierarchy.

However, references scattered across inscriptions, literary works, heroic stones, legends and folk traditions indicate that members of the Madiga community participated in a variety of social and historical activities. The available material refers to Madigas as soldiers, military leaders, fort guards, local functionaries and individuals who sacrificed their lives for the welfare of their communities and villages.

The present study therefore seeks to reconstruct selected aspects of Madiga history by bringing together different categories of evidence. Rather than relying exclusively on royal chronicles and conventional political histories, it considers inscriptions, literary references, hero stones, legends and living traditions as sources for understanding the historical experiences of the community.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine historical references associated with the terms *Madiga*, *Matanga* and *Matangi*.
2. To identify references to the Madiga community in inscriptions and other historical sources.
3. To examine evidence concerning the participation of Madigas in military activities.
4. To analyse literary and folk traditions relating to Madiga heroes and leaders.
5. To document selected hero-stone and sacrifice traditions associated with Madigas.
6. To examine the historical significance of local traditions from the Chitradurga region.
7. To highlight the importance of alternative sources in reconstructing the history of socially marginalised communities.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is primarily historical and qualitative in nature. It uses a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary and traditional historical sources contained in the study material.

The major categories of evidence considered are:

- Inscriptions;
- Literary works;
- Heroic stones and memorial monuments;
- Legends and oral traditions;
- Local religious and cultural practices; and
- Historical interpretations concerning *matanga*, *matangi* and *madiga*.

The study does not attempt to treat all oral traditions as independently established historical facts. Instead, they are considered as cultural and historical memory that can contribute to understanding how the community remembers its past. Claims concerning chronology, genealogy, etymology and historical identity require corroboration through epigraphic, archaeological and textual evidence.

4. Historical Background of the Madigas

The conventional political history of India provides relatively limited information about the lives of communities situated at the lower levels of the historical social hierarchy. Nevertheless, references to Madigas appear in different forms across literary, epigraphic and oral sources.

The study material identifies three broad areas through which the historical role of the Madigas can be examined: the use of the terms *Matanga* and *Matangi*; inscriptions, *Mahasati* and *Veeragallu* traditions; and poetry and folk literature.

These sources collectively suggest that the historical experience of the Madigas cannot be understood solely through occupational or caste-based descriptions. They also contain references to military service, leadership, sacrifice, local administration and cultural traditions.

5. Matanga and Matangi: Historical and Cultural Associations

One important theme in the historical discussion concerns the relationship between the terms *Madiga*, *Matanga* and *Matangi*. The source material associates the Madigas with the name

Matanga and records traditions in which members of the community identify themselves as descendants of Matanga and Matangi. It also notes that during the 1891 Mysore Census some Madigas reportedly identified themselves as “Matanga Brahmins” on the basis of community traditions.

The material further records the view of M. A. Stuart that a Matanga dynasty ruled parts of the Kannada region in ancient times. It also discusses traditions connecting Matangas with Buddhist history and refers to accounts concerning King Prasenajit and his association with the Matanga clan.

These traditions are historically significant because they demonstrate the existence of community memories concerning political status, ancestry and religious associations. However, such claims should be examined critically by comparing literary traditions with datable inscriptions and other independent evidence.

6. Madigas as Soldiers and Military Leaders

One of the most significant aspects emerging from the material is the representation of Madigas and Matangas in military contexts. Banabhatta's sixth-century literary work is cited in connection with a Matanga chief described as a powerful warrior accompanied by numerous followers. The source also refers to Matanga soldiers participating in the military campaigns associated with Mangalesha of the Chalukya kingdom around the seventh century. Another literary reference occurs in Somadevabhatta's *Kathasaritsagara*, where Durgapishacha is described as a Matanga hero commanding a large body of skilled archers. The account presents the Matanga warriors as formidable military forces. The material also refers to a legend from Andhra Pradesh in which a powerful Madiga was appointed as a general by a king. The narrative describes the general as an independent and powerful figure who eventually rebelled against the king. Such narratives, whether interpreted literally or as community memory, indicate the existence of traditions associating Madigas with military authority.

Importantly, the evidence is not limited to men. The literary reference to Matangi in Nanjunda's *Ramanathacharita* describes Matangi as the leader of an army who defeats Kumararama. This tradition is particularly important for examining representations of Madiga women as military figures. Thus, literary traditions provide evidence that challenges interpretations that restrict the historical role of Madigas exclusively to subordinate occupations.

7. Epigraphic Evidence

Inscriptions constitute an important source for reconstructing social history because they provide information about people, occupations, donations, institutions and social relationships. The material refers to an inscription dated 964 CE from Hunavalli village in Soraba taluk of Shivamogga district in which the term “Madiga” occurs. Another inscription from the same village, dated 997 CE, is cited as evidence concerning Madiga-associated individuals and donations.

The study material further refers to the Adoor inscription of 1044 CE, which mentions Madiga in association with the king of Rajapujita Vibhumadigam, and to a twelfth-century Kalaghatagi inscription mentioning Mandalika Madiga. These references are interpreted as evidence that individuals identified with the Madiga name occupied positions of political authority during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The material also discusses occupational and fiscal references associated with tanning. The term “Madarike” is mentioned in connection with a tax or duty associated with tanning, indicating that occupations traditionally associated with the community were also connected to the economic and administrative structures of the state.

A fourteenth-century inscription from Shravanabelagola is also interpreted in the source as referring to the Jambava clan, which the study associates with the Madiga community through the tradition of Adijambhava. Seventeenth-century inscriptional material is further cited for references to Holeya-Madigas. These inscriptions demonstrate an important methodological point: marginalised communities were not absent from historical records, although references to them may be scattered and require careful interpretation.

8. Madiga Heroes and Hero-Stone Traditions

Hero stones (*Veeragallu*) and memorial traditions provide another important source for understanding community history. The material argues that monuments erected in memory of Madiga men and women preserve memories of sacrifice and heroism. In some locations, such figures continue to be worshipped. One tradition concerns Channayya Baludu, who sought the assistance of Madigas during warfare. According to the narrative, the Madigas helped the king achieve victory but subsequently faced social humiliation. The story ends with the death of the Madiga heroes and the establishment of hero-stone worship in their memory. The continuing observance of festivals and ritual practices associated with Madiga heroes in Karnataka demonstrates how historical memory may survive outside formal written histories. The *Bharat Punnim* tradition described in the material is one such example.

9. Madigas in the Vijayanagara Military Tradition

The study material associates Madigas with the military organisation of the Vijayanagara period. It refers to literary and inscriptional evidence suggesting that people from different social groups were represented in the army and identifies references to “Holeyara Halla” and “Madigara Hampa” in the poetry of Nanjunda. A hill near Kammatdurga is reportedly known as “Madigara Hampayyana Gudda,” which is interpreted in the material as a possible memory of a warrior associated with the locality. The reference to Matangi as an army leader in *Ramanathacharita* further strengthens the literary representation of Madigas as military participants and leaders.

10. Women, Sacrifice and Community Memory: The Case of Bandamma

The historical traditions of Madiga women deserve particular attention. The case of Bandamma, associated with Ondakere village on the Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh border, represents a tradition of sacrifice for village welfare. According to the recorded legend, Bandamma was a pregnant woman who was selected for sacrifice in connection with the repeated failure of a village lake embankment. She ultimately entered the lake, after which the tradition records that the lake rose and the problem was resolved. Her sacrifice is remembered through a shrine, and land was reportedly granted to her relatives. The Bandamma tradition is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the presence of women within the community's historical memory as figures of sacrifice. Second, it illustrates how local legends can preserve memories of marginalised individuals whose lives may not have been documented in conventional political histories. At the same time, the ritual and supernatural elements of the story should be treated as components of oral tradition rather than automatically accepted as empirically established historical events.

11. Iranna: The Fort Guard Tradition

Another important tradition from Hiriyr taluk concerns Iranna, a Madiga who is remembered as a fort guard. According to the local account, Iranna served at the fort of Bagganadu and was responsible for closing the fort gates at night and opening them in the morning. The narrative describes his relationship with a woman from another village and the hostility he encountered because of caste differences. His death subsequently became the basis for local hero worship. His weapon is still reported to be worshipped by Madigas in Kasturi Rangappanahalli, and a temple and annual festival are associated with his memory.

This tradition is particularly valuable for social history because it provides a picture of a Madiga occupying a position of responsibility within a fort system. It also illustrates the transformation of a historical or legendary individual into a local deity through collective memory and ritual.

12. Sravanappa: Duty, Sacrifice and Village Welfare

The tradition of Madigara Sravanappa is associated with Dharmapura village in Hiriya taluk of Chitradurga district. The source records him as a waterman responsible for the lake.

According to the legend, during heavy rainfall the lake became dangerously full. Sravanappa was expected to protect the village and its agricultural lands. The narrative culminates in his sacrifice, after which the village reportedly granted ten acres of land to his family and the locality became associated with his name.

A memorial idol associated with Sravanappa is reportedly situated near the lake, and local religious practices continue around it. The tradition portrays him not simply as a person performing an occupation but as an individual whose sense of duty became associated with the welfare of the entire village.

13. Eranna (Veeraguddanna) and the Hero Stone

Another important example is Eranna, also referred to as Veeraguddanna, associated with Gannaikanahalli village in Hiriya taluk. The material records a tradition in which Eranna was killed while attempting to obtain and bring back material associated with a village festival and its welfare. A temple was subsequently constructed at the location associated with his death. Inside the structure is a hero figure carved on stone, represented with a bow and dagger. The site continues to be worshipped by members of the Madiga community.

The tradition demonstrates the connection between hero stones, local religious practice and collective memory. It also provides evidence of how the death of an individual can be transformed into a permanent cultural memory through a memorial structure and annual ritual practices.

14. Madigara Siddha and the Talawarik Position

A particularly interesting reference concerns Madigara Siddha, who is recorded in an unpublished donation inscription from Jagalur taluk of Chitradurga district dated 1954. The source identifies him as having held the position of a *Talawarik*.

This reference is significant because it extends the historical discussion into the post-Independence period. It suggests that individuals identified as Madigas could occupy positions of local responsibility even in the twentieth century.

Taken together, the epigraphic and traditional evidence presented in the study suggests a much wider historical role for the community than conventional narratives might indicate. The material concludes that Madigas appear in the sources as kings, leaders, soldiers, heroes and martyrs.

15. Poetry, Folk Literature and Cultural Memory

Poetry and folk literature are particularly valuable for studying communities whose experiences are inadequately represented in formal political histories. The study material examines the cultural background of the term “Madiga” and records different interpretations of its origin and meaning. It also discusses traditions connecting Madigas with Adi Jambava, Matanga and related identities. The material further describes the historical relationship between the Madiga and Holeya/Chaluvadi communities and discusses traditions associated with the right-handed and left-handed social divisions. It presents these traditions as part of the cultural and historical memory of the communities concerned. The concept of Adi Jambava is particularly prominent in this cultural memory. The source connects the term with a broader mythological tradition concerning Jambu Island and the origins of humanity. Such traditions are important objects of historical and anthropological study because they demonstrate how communities construct, preserve and transmit their own understandings of ancestry and identity.

16. Major Findings

The study reveals the following major findings:

1. The historical presence of Madigas can be traced through different categories of sources, including inscriptions, literature, hero stones and folk traditions.
2. The terms *Matanga* and *Matangi* occupy an important place in the community's historical and cultural traditions.
3. Literary sources contain representations of Matanga and Matangi figures associated with military activities.
4. Epigraphic evidence contains references to individuals identified as Madiga and to occupations and economic activities associated with the community.

5. Madigas are represented in the historical traditions as soldiers, military leaders and fort guards.
6. Women also occupy an important place in the community's heroic and sacrificial traditions.
7. Hero stones and memorial shrines have helped preserve the memory of Madiga heroes.
8. The Chitradurga region contains significant local traditions that can contribute to the reconstruction of Madiga social history.
9. Oral traditions continue to connect historical memory with contemporary religious and cultural practices.
10. The history of marginalised communities requires methodologies that go beyond conventional king-centred historical narratives.

17. CONCLUSION

The historical study of the Madiga community demonstrates the importance of broadening the scope of Indian historiography. Communities that occupied socially disadvantaged positions were not necessarily absent from the historical process. Their contributions may instead be dispersed across inscriptions, literary works, oral traditions, hero stones, memorial shrines and local cultural practices.

The evidence examined in this study presents Madigas in a range of historical and cultural roles, including soldiers, military leaders, fort guards, village functionaries, local officials, heroes and martyrs. The traditions surrounding Bandamma, Iranna, Sravanappa, Eranna and Madigara Siddha demonstrate the richness of local historical memory, particularly in the Chitradurga region.

The study therefore argues for a more inclusive approach to historical research in which the experiences of socially marginalised communities are investigated through multiple sources. Such an approach can enrich social history by recovering voices and memories that have received limited attention in conventional historical narratives.

However, further research is necessary to verify individual claims through systematic epigraphic, archaeological, linguistic and archival investigation. A rigorous reconstruction of Madiga history should distinguish clearly between documented historical evidence, literary representation, oral tradition and community memory. Such critical engagement will strengthen the academic study of Madiga history while also recognising the importance of the community's own historical traditions.

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