Divisions and Unity

Brahmanism divided Indian people into various endogamous caste groups, placing them in a graded hierarchy, and monopolised education, wealth and political power in the hands of few upper castes. This inequality produced the Dalit movement in India. As a result, reservation policy came into being for providing equality of opportunities for SCs and STs. But this policy could not distribute reservation benefits equally among 59 Scheduled Castes in A.P. as the vertically structured system placed one Scheduled Caste below and above the other. Consequently new inequalities developed amongst Dalits in the form of reservation benefits. Brahmanism produced the Dalit movement. Similarly Dalit Brahmanism which believed in a monopoly of one or two Scheduled Castes produced the Dandora movement in A.P., creating divisions in the Dalit movement. It is caught in a paradoxical situation of having to unite the Dalits against the upper castes and to confront divisions within the Dalits. In other words, the Dalit movement in A.P. is caught in dividing and uniting factors.

Varnadharma determined social distance between castes based on gradation of occupations. The traditional occupation of Madigas is tanning the leather, making chappals, and leather goods production. The traditional occupation of Malas is weaving, village watchmen, and they are engaged as agricultural labourers. The occupation of Madigas was graded as unclean and of Malas was graded as clean. This determined distance between residential quarters of Madigas and Malas, symbol of their divisions. Notions of purity and pollution associated with their traditional occupation determined social and physical distance between them. The living quarters of untouchables are constructed at a respectable distance from the living quarters of Savarnas and Sudras in A.P. Malas live next to Sudras. Madigas live a little away from Malas, Dakkals live a little away from Madiga living quarters(1). Geographical distance between castes’ residential quarters, of various castes, is designed in accordance with the strategy of Brahminism to separate one from another, indicating the cleavages between Malas and Madigas. The structural cleavages are responsible for the birth of Dandora Movement in Andhra Pradesh and necessitated the movement for a separate Association for Madigas.

Leadership is a dividing factor of the Dalit movement in A.P. Every caste has a distinct identity and its specific problems. The internal cleavages give ample scope for doubting the integrity of the leader of a particular caste by other castes. This lays a foundation for the other castes to develop their own leaders to attend to their specific problems and to work for the development of their own caste. In the 1930s, the pioneering leader of Dalits, Sri Bhagya Reddy Varma’s pro-Mala leadership sowed the seeds of separate leadership culture.
for each of sub-castes(2). The leading personality of the Arundhatiya Mahasabha, Mudigonda Laxmaiah, emerged as a leader of Madigas and carried on the separate leadership culture into the post-Independence period. The leadership of the Arundhatiya Banduseva Mandali was the product of this culture. Today, P.V. Rao of Mala Mahanadu and M. Krishna Madiga of M.R.P.S. represent the two sections of Bhagya Reddy Varma and Mudigonda Laxmaiah of the pre-Independence Dalit wings. These two wings are sharpening the idea of a need for separate associations. The emergence of sub-caste leadership as the foundation for separate identity on separate problems is unavoidable as long as these identities are continued in the hierarchically structured Indian society.

Dalits have been divided on party lines as well. Party spirit plays a divisive role as its origin is in the varied outlook and interests of peoples. A political party is rooted in the social and economic system. It also divides people as it represents the various interests of different section of society. We can see three types of divisions among the Dalits due to the mischief of party spirit: first, accommodations of Dalit leaders in political parties; second, encouraging Dalit associations as their sister organisations; third, splitting Dalit organisations and converting them into their sister organisations. Mala leaders were the first beneficiaries in the accommodative politics of Congress Party. Dalit leaders who belonged to the first generation stream of the educated were accommodated into the Congress Party during the 1930s. Arigay Ramaswamy and B.S. Venkat Rao were the first to join. They continued in the Congress party even in the post-Independence period (Venkatswamy 1955, p.656). From the Madiga section, Shankar Deve and Mudigonda Laxmaiah were the prominent leaders who were accommodated by the Congress party as the leaders of Madigas. During post-Independence period the Madigas and Malas worked in different social organisations. The social organisations of Madigas carried on their activities with the blessings of Babu Jagjeevan Ram, while the Mala social organisations carried on their activities with the blessings of former Chief Minister of A.P., late Damodaram Sanjeeviah. The view is that the Congress party wanted separate organisations as this served the interests of the ruling party. Only in the 1980s, T.D.P. [Telugu Desham Party] made it a clear policy to make best use of already divided organisations for its political advantage and support the Madigas’ cause of categorisation. As against T.D.P., the Congress Party silently supported Mala Mahanadu against categorisation. Political parties clearly used the divisions among the Dalits to their own benefit. In the 1998 Parliamentary elections Dandora supported T.D.P. while Mala Mahanadu supported the Congress Party.

Untouchability, as a ‘touch me not’ manifested itself in the form of social discrimination suffered by untouchables, gives them a feeling of "WE THE SUFFERERS OF UNTOUCHABILITY". Even after 50 years of independence, Scheduled Castes are suffering from disabilities of untouchability in various forms in Andhra Pradesh. Dalit consciousness – the realization of loss of prestige, societal benefits and need for togetherness to fight for lost rights, exists among the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. This consciousness is slowly growing to a stage where it breaks upper caste hegemony, […] The ideas of Phule, Periar, Ramasami Naiker and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar are sowing the seeds of fraternity and unity among Dalits. In a way their ideas are providing an ideological umbrella for Dalit consciousness against casteism in Andhra Pradesh.

In a number of cases Dalits fought against upper castes atrocities against the untouchables. Atrocities committed on them created a feeling of ‘WE-NESS’ among Dalits. This feeling was witnessed in incidents like Karamchedu and Chunduru, the major atrocities on Dalits committed in the post-Independence period in Andhra Pradesh. In Karamchedu, Madigas were killed by Kammas, while in Chunduru Malas were killed by Reddys. Forgetting their
societies, they proved that they are one and can fight the upper castes whenever the occasion demands. There was an attempt to murder Gaddar, a Mala, popular singer and prominent leader of the People’s War Group in 1997. Dandora took the lead to oppose the ruling class and its attempt to murder Gaddar(3). The Dalits have been proving their unity whenever atrocities are committed on them.

N. Subha Reddi 1950. *Community conflict among the depressed castes of Andhra*, *Man in India* 30, 4, pp 1-12.[a]

N. Subha Reddi’s report, prepared in the Independence period of the mid 20th century, sets up a baseline of glimpses into the uniformities of life at that period – and hardly less important, its variations – for Madigas and Malas across the Telugu region that had been within the Madras Presidency of pre-Independence India. From his extensive research in this wide region he was able to set out patterns such as they had probably never before been visible. He highlights and explains the long-standing antagonism between the two castes: aspects of it are touched on throughout this collection. As a baseline, his work shows not only the deeply rooted nature of tensions between the two castes but also the extent to which matters between them were always variable and the ways in which this variation operated and led to disturbance.

[Extracts to be added as available]


From fieldwork centred in a village in the far south of Nellore district in the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh in 1990-91 comes this fine study. Within the village itself, Madigas were by far the largest caste community, with 106 families. Together with Harijan Malas and Vetti Malas they made up almost a third of the total population. Though the study's distinctive focus is on the mica mining industry and its effects through time on power and control within the one village, it is exceptionally sensitive to the concerns and struggles of people of lower castes, particularly the Madigas and Malas, and over a wider area. This recent study is quoted repeatedly in this collection (Chapters 3, 4 and 9, as well as in the present context).

[pp 205-6]

Stopping drum beating: Until very recently, the Malas showed their resistance towards high castes and the Madigas in a different way. The Christian Malas could stop the drum beating of Madigas near their worship place, the church. There was a norm that all religious places should be honoured by not making any kind of noise, including drum beating by people of other religions. According to this norm, the Mala converts demanded that the Madigas should stop their drum beating during processions near the church. This demand was supported by missionaries who maintained good relations with the British administrators. The high castes also had to respect the church of the Malas.

In some cases where the Malas and the Madigas had good relations, the Madigas supported the demand of the Malas. They stopped drum beating even before they were asked to stop, despite the high castes' insistence that they keep playing drums as processions approached the church. The Madigas defied the orders of the high castes for a moment, taking the pretext of the Malas' cause.
Symbolic gestures: The Malas of Chinnakomerla explained that chindu, a traditional dance of the Madigas, is a form of resistance to the domination of the Malas and the high castes. Chindu is performed by other castes also but most frequently by the Malas. The latter love to perform this dance. The performance of chindu consists of rhythmic stamping of legs, moving of hands, and putting up ferocious face as if the dance is inviting the observer to a fight. This performance takes place during the marriage processions of high castes and during village rituals. On these occasions, chindu is performed by a Madiga while three to six other Madigas beat their circular drums, the thappetlu. During this performance, the chindu player raises one of his legs and stamps it to the ground. I was told that, sometimes, he raises his leg against high caste people who witness the dance but do not notice because they are in a jubilant mood. By raising and stamping his leg, the Madiga man symbolically crushes the high castes under his foot.

Malas would never allow Madigas to play this chindu in their locality or in any of their rituals. Even in Anthatipuram the same practice exists. As explained to me, chindu was originally played by the Malas alone; a Mala used to have a knife in his right hand, a red piece of cloth in his left hand, a piece of cloth tied around his waist as a girdle and anklets with small bells on his ankles. The knife is like a sword and the red cloth symbolizes blood, therefore, the dance symbolizes a fight or war. According to the story, a Mala man developed an illicit liaison with a Madiga woman. One day he went to her with the above insignia. While he was sleeping in her house, he was spotted by Madiga men. When he was about to be beaten up he escaped, leaving behind his insignia. The Madigas appropriated these insignia and started playing chindu mocking the fleeing Mala who displayed courage in chindu. It also exposed the illicit behaviour of the Malas who claimed themselves superior over the Madigas. From then onwards the Malas stopped playing chindu out of shame, and that is the reason why the Malas do not like the Madigas to play chindu in their rituals.