Chapter 10
Village conflict and atrocities

The conflict between Madigas and the dominant castes of their villages, already touched on in Chapter 9, has not been due only to Christianity, nor is it altogether separate from the other historically conspicuous conflict, with the Malas, considered in Chapter 8. In neither case have open conflicts ever been universal, but underlying tensions may well have been generally present. Christian conversion did, however, introduce new conflicts as well as new possibilities for Madigas. This chapter follows on from the previous one, first taking up this new context for conflict. It goes on to examine the dreadful Karamchedu atrocity of 1985 which, as has been noted, had important positive consequences for Dalit solidarity. It ends with accounts of two others atrocities of the most recent decade. They make the point that old conflicts are only too often continuing, sometimes over new issues, but also show new factors, such as the Human Rights movement and its international dimension coming into play.

Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough 1899.
While Sewing Sandals.
Or Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe.
London: Hodder & Stoughton

[pp 207-11]
There was an element of refinement in the appearance of Rutnam. His features were regular and of a noble outline. Every passing emotion found expression in his eyes; hence the look of anxiety that became habitual in his later years, stamped there by the many hardships of his life. When met by kindness his face could light up with a rare smile. He was a man who in return for kindness could give devotion.

During the first few years of his ministry he often took his wife with him, to help him as he preached in the villages here and there. This became impracticable. As the converts multiplied the vexation of the Sudras grew. Trouble was heaped upon the preacher and his wife, till Rutnam said, ‘It is not safe for a woman to face these insults.’ Henceforth he went alone.

A social revolution on a small scale was in progress during those early years. The Madiga population was fast being Christianized, and in consequence there was a breaking away from economic and social relations that had held the Madigas during many centuries. There was novelty in the desire of the Christians to have one day in seven for purposes of rest and worship. To many a Madiga it had been an unknown accomplishment to remember the days of the week. It raised him decidedly in the scale of human beings when he became sufficiently enlightened to know the days as they passed. He found opportunity to cultivate moral fibre when he began to insist that he must have one day in seven reserved for the worship of his God.

To the Sudra landholder it was a cause of constant irritation to be obliged to reckon with this new spirit of independence on the part of the Madiga. He was accustomed to call his serfs to work whenever he required their service. Day and night, seed-time and harvest, they were to be ready to obey his call. He did not look upon their desire for a Sabbath of rest as a legitimate demand. It seemed to the Sudra usurpation of authority pure and simple. The
Karnam shared in the vexation of the Sudras, for when he called the Christian Yettis to work on Sunday, or start on long journeys with heavy burdens on their backs, they asked to be allowed to go the next day.

There was tension in all the region round about. Whenever some village matri, some fiend or demon, was to receive special worship, the question arose as to the course which should be pursued with the rebellious Madigas. It was part of the service which they owed to the village community, on the principle of mutual service, that they should beat the drums when there was a festival to the swamis. The Madigas had to furnish the leather for the drums. Who should beat them but they? To refuse to perform this old-time duty meant loss to them. They received the carcasses of the animals which were slaughtered to please the gods in question as remuneration for their special service.

The trouble culminated in the village Ballapudy, one of the villages in Rutnam's charge. The Madigas rebelled against ancient institutions, and in consequence the organization of the village community was used against them. [...] The Karnam of Ballapudy was not a man of strong personality. But he knew that he had power to harass, and decided to take the initiative, and show all the region round about how to deal with these recreant Madigas. Forthwith the village washermen were told not to wash for the Christians; the potter was told not to sell pots to them; their cattle were driven from the common grazing-ground; the Sudras combined in a refusal to give them the usual work of sewing sandals and harness; at harvest-time they were not allowed to help, and thus lost the supply of grain which the Sudras had always granted them. They were boycotted and ostracized on every hand. The Karnam called the heathen Madigas from elsewhere to do the work of the village, and the Christians had no alternative but to go to distant villages to find a little work, and earn a scant pittance. This went on for a season. Rutnam suffered with the distress of his people.

A day of reckoning came when the Ongole Missionary pitched his camp in a grove near the village Ballapudy. He rode through the bazaar of the village, Rutnam and others of the Christians with him, made happy and full of courage by his presence.

[pp 214-17]
Deeply humiliated [by his encounter with the missionary], the Karnam went to his house. All had seen that he was a coward, who could oppress those in his power, but trembled in the presence of one who could call him to account for his actions. Many a man in that region, whose heart was full of anger against the Christians, decided to let others persecute them if they would, but that he would hold aloof.

Some years had passed, when the priests of the goddess Ankalamah decided that the annual feast at her temple in the village Muktimulla should be held with unusual pomp. There had been cattle-disease of late, and some of the wells were running dry. They said the goddess was probably angry because she had not of recent years been honoured sufficiently, and they hinted, too, that the Madigas and their refusal to beat the drums had fanned the displeasure of the goddess. Now Ankalamah is one of the ten great Saktis, a form of Parvati, consort of Siva. The Karnam of the village Muktimulla was a Brahmin, seventy years of age, and a worshipper of Siva. He decided that Ankalamah should have the drums beaten by the Madigas at her annual feast, just as she had seen it done during many a century. Moreover, she should have the pleasure of seeing the rebellious Madigas humiliated as they deserved.
When the feast was in course of preparation, and crowds of worshippers had gathered, the Karnam sent for the Christians to come and beat the drums. They returned a message that their religion forbade them to have anything to do with idol-worship. Five village constables were then sent to fetch five of the leading Christians. They were brought by force. Water was poured over their heads until it was thought the uncleanness of their Christian religion had been washed away. Their heads were shaved, and only a lock on top of their heads – the juttu – was left, that the swami might dwell therein. And, finally, their foreheads were marked like those of the other worshippers. The drums were forced into their hands, and for three days they had to endure the shame of their position, while large crowds came to worship the goddess.

Rutnam hastened to the spot. These men were members of his flock. But what could he do? What could be done even if they should unite in resistance? They were overpowered by numbers. The five men had gathered up the hair as it fell under the razor, and had tied it into their cloth. As soon as release came, they hastened to Ongole and told their tale to the Missionary, showing the hair in their cloth, taking off their turbans to show the bald heads that represented to them mutilation.

A case was filed in the criminal court. The English magistrate of Ongole tried the case in person. He asked the five Christians whether they considered themselves to have been insulted. They said, ‘It was as if our throats had been cut; our shame was so great.’ Rutnam and two Christian teachers were the witnesses on the one side, a crowd of false witnesses stood on the other side. The legal proceedings took some time, and then judgment was passed. Since the Karnam was an old man, he was spared the three years of imprisonment which he deserved. He had to pay a fine of thirty rupees, and was imprisoned for three months. As he was a Brahmin, imprisonment meant pollution of the very worst kind. He died four days after his release. His son took his place. When I asked Rutnam whether the son was better than the father, he replied, ‘Can a tiger have young jackals as children?’

Thus the government, which has made itself, in a measure, the vehicle of Christian principles, took no notice of Ankalamah’s desire to see the drums forced into the hands of defenceless Madigas. The violation of the law of religious toleration carries with it a maximum punishment of five years’ imprisonment. That an aged Brahmin, in respected position, should have been deeply humiliated because he insulted the religious belief of five men, who were of the outcasts, and in former days considered too low to come within the same jurisdiction that applied to the members of other castes, was, indeed, an indication that a new day had dawned for the remnant of an aboriginal tribe that had known nothing but abject servitude for many centuries.


Moving on a century, with all its major changes, but remaining in the same general region of the country, the extract here focuses on the Madigas who were the victims at Karamchedu, on the murderous attack in 1985, and on its immediate aftermath. The article from which it is drawn also analyses the context in this, by the 1980s, huge and prosperous village in Prakasam district. It traces the rise of the Karamchedu Kammas in wealth and dominance, and the transformation of the
village from a Communist stronghold marked by class conflict in the 1940s, to the caste conflict of a generation later. It discusses the way the event brought Madigas and Malas and others of goodwill together so effectively in the immediate pre-Dandora period. The article was based on the Report of a Fact Finding Committee on the atrocity, of which the author was a member.

I

The vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Kammas from tenant cultivation was filled by the scheduled castes, which enabled many of them to graduate from the one-third system[a] to sharecropping and field tenancy. Of the two groups of scheduled castes (Malas and Madigas), the Kamma landlords prefer the Madigas, because they are supposed to be more submissive and the Malas more aggressive. Therefore as many as 200 out of the 250 Madiga households are tenants or sharecroppers, cultivating about two to four acres each. A few Madiga families have marginal holdings. A few instances of eight to 15 acres of sharecropping by Madiga households also exist. There are relatively fewer tenants among the Malas. Since the entire area under the village is brought under a single crop at a time, there is a marked labour scarcity during the sowing and harvesting seasons. Although wage rates are not commensurately high, most of the farm work during the season is done through piece-rate contract, giving an opportunity to workers to earn a reasonable income, though for a short period. On an average, this works out to Rs 6 for women and Rs 15 for men. During the lean season, the male workers get casual employment in earthwork, while the women work in tobacco-grading for three to four months. The wage now falls to Rs 5 for women and Rs 10 for men. Although the wages are low in tobacco-grading, the lean season offers no option. The tenant cultivation, sharecropping, contract labour and tobacco-grading employment together enable the scheduled castes, especially Madigas, to live in ‘passable’ comfort.

II

What happened on July 17 at Karamchedu? A few thousands of Kammas armed with sticks, axes and spears launched a premeditated savage attack on the Madiga section of the harijan hamlet. The pretext for the rampage was an incident which had taken place on the previous afternoon. On July 16, at about 3.30 pm, a Kamma youth washing his buffalo at the drinking water tank threw the water on the steps leading to the tank. Since the ground water is saline in this area, the tank is the main source of drinking water to the harijans and even the other communities draw water from it when the other tank in the village gets polluted. A lame Madiga boy who was present had objected to the way in which the drinking water was being polluted. The Kamma had reacted violently and beat him with the cattle-whip. A young Madiga woman who dared to raise her vessel against him had retaliated with the vessel in her hand. An elderly person from the harijan settlement had intervened and averted a clash. But the Kamma had left the place warning them of further consequences. After an hour, he brought a few of his relatives and friends along with him to the harijan hamlet, picked up a quarrel with the young woman who dared to raise her vessel against him and beat her up. The neighbours of the women intervened and requested the Kammas to leave and to discuss the matter later when the woman's husband and father-in-law returned from the fields.

Mennangi Ankaiah, the father-in-law of the young woman, returned late in the evening from his upland fields where he was cultivating eight acres of land on lease. He was summoned to go to the village katcheri [court] to give an explanation for the behaviour of his daughter-in-law. Fear gripped him in anticipation of the katcheri verdict. He declined to go to the
katcheri under the excuse that it was already dark. Instead he rushed to one of his former employers to seek wiser counsel but he was asked to come back in the morning.

At about 9.30pm on the 16th night, Chaganti Singaiah, a Kamma having business relations (moneylending, tractor leasing, etc) with the scheduled castes, went to Tella Mosaiah, a leader of the Madiga sangham and informed him that the Kammas in the village were busy scheming an attack on the Madigas. He proposed that they should work for a compromise with the help of Hari Babu, who stays in Chirala. Along with four others, they went to Chirala but since it was already 11 o'clock in the night and since it was too late to contact anyone in Karamchedu, Hari Babu's brother suggested that they had better meet the following morning.

What happened on the morning of July 17 was totally unexpected by the Madigas. Pandiri Nageswara Rao, an elderly harijan[b] who had intervened to pacify the Kamma youth the previous day, went out at 7.00 am for his usual cup of tea in the village corner. As he was walking out of the stall a couple of Kamma youth accosted him using foul language. Even before he realised what was happening, one hit him on the face with his chappal and soon there were a large number of Kammas surrounding him, beating and kicking. He fell down but was pulled up and dragged to the centre of the village to be tied to an electric pole. He saw hundreds of Kammas armed with sticks, axes and spears gathered along the street. In the meanwhile Mennangi Ankaiah, the father-in-law of the harijan woman who was involved in the previous day's incident, went to his former employer for advice. The Kammas dragged him out. He was beaten savagely and left near the cattle sheds for dead.

While Nageswara Rao and Ankaiah were being beaten in the main village, a handful of Kammas went to the Madiga settlement, apparently to propose a compromise over the events of the day before, but in fact to ascertain the situation there. When the reconnaissance mission found that the harijans were going about their daily routine without anticipation of an attack on them, they slipped into the main village and gave the signal to strike. And soon there were waves of Kammas armed with sticks, spears and axes converging on the Madiga settlement from all the three sides. The panic-struck Madigas started fleeing the village. The first reaction of the women was that they would not be beaten, but soon they realised to their dismay that everyone was being beaten up indiscriminately. Pregnant women, women with babies in their arms, young girls, old women, no-one was spared. One young woman later aborted in the Chirala hospital and at least three of the women were raped. Those who shut themselves up inside their houses faced the worst attack. Doors were broken open, women, children and old people were dragged out and attacked. Those who were fleeing were chased, surrounded and subjected to lethal blows. Four harijans died on the spot, two died in the hospital and many escaped with serious injuries by pretending death. Those working in their fields were also not spared. They were chased on tractors and motor cycles. Many of the terror-stricken harijans ran all the way across the fields to Chirala.

On July 17, at about 11.30 am, a mass of shattered humanity arrived at the church compound at Chirala. Many had virtually run all the five miles from Karamchedu chased by assailants on motorcycles and tractors and even RTC[c] buses. Those who had brought the bodies of their dead to the Chirala hospital were numbed – too numbed even to weep. The others were dazed. Women were sobbing. Samson, a young lad at Chirala asked them what
happened and was told ‘Ayya, we are being butchered by the Kammas. We are from Karamchedu. We are dying. What more can we say?’ The trickle of victims turned into a veritable flood. Men and women with blood-spotted clothing came running like hunted rabbits into the sanctuary of the church. Cries and wails soon rent the air. The local harijans and sympathisers in Chirala gathered at the church compound to help the victims. When they suggested that police be informed, the victims told them that the police was already there in Karamchedu. There were three constables right from the beginning. (There was a clash among Malas the previous day and the constables had been posted in the village.) They were silent spectators. Even when the police reinforcements arrived, they were not of much help to the harijans. In fact they beat up some of the harijan youth and the first to be locked up in the Chirala police station were the harijan boys running in panic towards Chirala. The police were not of much help even in bringing the dead and injured to the Chirala hospital.

No police or government official visited the victims at the church that day. The confusion of sobbing people searching for their near and dear in the crowd increased. It was past 7.30 pm. The local people collected some money and prepared food for the harijans. When the food was served late in the night, many victims were too overwhelmed to eat, others forced themselves to eat, only to bring it out later. At the hospital, the situation was even more chaotic. The doctor on duty, M.V. Ramana, says that the injured came on their own. The police did not give him any requisition. The doctor did give a requisition to the magistrate for recording the dying declarations of 22 injured people, but the doctor does not know what statements were recorded.

It was on the 18th noon that the District Collector arrived with 150 meal coupons. He asked the victims to move to the Rotary Club premises, and only then would food be served. ‘No, we don't want your meal coupons, if you want to feed only 150 of us. We are 500. Further, we don't want to move. We feel safe here.’ The Collector was taken aback. ‘No compliance with orders, no assistance.’

Once again, local youngsters swung into action. They took charge of the feeding programme. They appealed to the people with the slogan, ‘poothaku o peta’, each peta [hamlet], one meal). This had a cathartic effect. People responded magnificently, bringing rice, dal, oil, etc. The 13 scheduled caste petas of Chirala bore the burden cheerfully, but as news spread, bags of rice came from nearby villages. The Guntur hospital patients and their attendants were brought food, fruits, clothes, and pocket expenses from the petas in Guntur itself: Veramma, a victim, says, ‘The government has so far not given us anything. It's our own folks, those who labour, pull rickshaws, who are supporting us, feeding us. The rickshaw-puller who earns twenty rupees a day, brings us two.’

What we ourselves saw was amazing. Youngsters in scheduled castes hostels, workers in mills, factories, employees, daily wage labourers and rickshaw pullers ... they brought over the necessities to the Karamchedu victims, and the warmth and sympathy that accompanied each morsel of rice, each banana, each rupee spoke volumes. ‘Keep up the fight’, they said, these anonymous donors, ‘you have suffered for us all. You fight for us all. If you win, we win. If you lose, we lose’.

To commemorate the 10th anniversary in 1995, the Jana Natya Mandal, cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), published Kāramcēду pōrāta katha (Story of the Karamchedu struggle) as an oggu katha [d]. It included a song, ‘Dalita pululammā’, which became widely popular. It begins:

daḷīta pululammā! kāramcēḍu bhusvamulamidā
Dalit tigers here!
against Karamcedu landlords they waged their struggle.
In Karamchedu there’s a hamlet: Madigapalle is its name,
It’s like a mother to Malas, Muslims, Vadderas and Boyas.
If even an enemy comes for refuge, it shows them mercy.
The legs of Kamma landlords’ tremble when they hear the name of Madigapalle.
If they wielded the sword, hey! the lords of the village would be terrified.[e]

From: hrwatchnyc@igc.org
Subject: India: Killings of Dalits in AP
Date: 30 Jul 1998
To: R.V. Pillai
Secretary General
National Human Rights Commission
Sardar Patel Bhawan
Samsad Marg
New Delhi 110-001

Dear Secretary Pillai:

I am writing to alert you to the killings of at least eight and perhaps as many as thirty or more low-caste villagers in Vempanta, a village in Pamulapadu Mandal, Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh. The incident took place in the early morning hours of July 16, 1998. To our knowledge, no one has yet been arrested in connection with the massacre.

Several hours before the killings began, a former village official and member of the high caste community named Sivaiah was murdered in his home, apparently by members of the People’s War Group (PWG), a radical Marxist-Leninist organization that has advocated the
use of violence to achieve land reform. According to a report prepared by a local human rights organization that visited the site on July 20, there were rivalries between the PWG and another leftist organization to which Mr. Sivaiah belonged, which may have provided the motive for the murder. As some members of the scheduled caste (Dalit or "untouchable") Madriga [sic] community are believed to be sympathetic to the PWG, the murder apparently provided the high caste landlord community a pretext for attacking the Madriga colony in the village. Between 1:30 a.m. and 5:30 a.m. a mob rampaged through the colony hacking to death at least eight people and throwing their bodies into a house that was then set on fire. Some reports estimate the number killed to be thirty or more. At least 100 houses were burned to the ground. Most of those killed were Madrigas, although some also belonged to the Dalit Mala community and some to another low caste community known as the Backward caste.

Local police did not appear on the scene for more than ten hours. As all of the Madriga families had fled out of fear, the police reportedly spoke only with members of the landlord community.

The police have filed some forty cases against Madrigas suspected in the killing of Mr. Isaiah. As of July 20, no charges had been filed against any of the villagers who participated in the attack on the Madriga colony. Madriga villagers interviewed by the human rights team stated that many of their attackers were still present in the village and appeared to have police protection.

The current tensions between the high-caste land holding villagers and low caste villagers emerged two years ago when Madrigas staked a claim to local temple lands that the high caste villagers had arrogated to themselves and began to cultivate them. Human rights activists who have investigated the incident believe that the land dispute was the real reason for the massacre.

As you are aware, attacks of this kind on Dalit communities in India are frequent and those responsible are seldom prosecuted. We urge you to send a team to investigate the incident as soon as possible and ensure that a case is registered under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and those responsible for the attack arrested and charged. The affected community should be provided protection and compensation, as provided under the law. The behavior of local police should also be investigated, and any found to have conspired with the attackers or to have failed to intervened promptly appropriately punished.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Sidney Jones
Executive Director