

Mathamma Jathara: A Cultural Symbolism of Madiga Community

Dr. Mallikarjuna Chiruthoti Research Fellow, Centre for Folk Culture Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Prof. C. R. Rao Road, P.O. Central University, Hyderabad-500046, Telangana, India

Abstract

Madiga is one of the Scheduled Castes of Andhra Pradesh. Madigas are suppressed and oppressed sections of the society since the ages. According to Jambapurana, Mathamma or Matangi is the mother goddess of the Madigas community. They celebrate the Mathamma Jathara as a ritual at community level. Madigas are identified with their own symbols and occupation which represents their culture. This paper explains how the Mathamma Jathara became a cultural symbolism of the Madiga community in general, and in particular, how the Mathamma or Mathamma Jathara evolved, as well as the historical evidence of how the Madigas claim to be the children of Mathamma and how the Mathamma Jathara procession takes place in the community.

Key words: Madiga, Matamma, Culture, Kulapurana, Jathara, Symbolism

Introduction

According to the Indian Constitution (*Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950* (Rules and Orders under the Constitution), Andhra Pradesh had sixty one Dalit communities. Among these heterogeneous communities, Mala and Madiga are in great number. Both Mala and Madiga had their own sub-groups. The sub-groups of Mala and Madiga directly or indirectly rely on their principle castes (Mala and Madiga) for their livelihood. Mala and its sub-groups are right hand castes (*kudivaraam*) and Madiga and its sub-groups are left hand castes (*melavaram*) (Y.A. Sudhakar Reddy, 2012: 43). Malas directly involved in the production process because they are right hand castes. Some Mala families are small scale farmers and they work in agricultural lands. They get kind (get the shares from the crops) or cash for their agricultural services. These reciprocal relations were based mutual understand of both the peasant and other castes those who tied up with the land (Y.A. Sudhakar Reddy, 2012: 43). Madigas are left hand castes and they do not directly participate in the production process and their main profession is leather work. Along with leather work they also participate in menial works, skinning and tanning works and disposal of dead carcasses. So, as per the Indian social system, whoever involved in the leather related and menial scavenging works they were keep away from the mainstream society.

Origin of Madiga Caste:

Madigas are leather workers, menial workers, and drumbeaters and sometimes they act as agricultural laborers. They considered as untouchables during pre-independence times, and their position is very low in the caste structure. The Madigas are popular with different names *i.e.*, Gosangi, Arundhatiya, Jamhavvulu, Jambhavanthulu, Matanga, Ettivaru and Tegavau. According to T.R. Singh, “some of these names had mythological connection with Jambavanta a figure that appears in the epic of Ramayana” (T. R. Singh, 1969: 2).

According Rev. H. Huizinga (Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, 1987: 308-09), “Madigas lives in hamlets (hamlets are living places of untouchables which are located outside the village). Madiga do the services to the higher caste people, especially in leather. They remove the ox, cow and buffalo as soon as it dies and they remove the skin and tan it. They eat the carcass, which makes them polluted and treated them as untouchable. They make drums (the drums are made with leather which are used in the festivals of local deities) with the removed skin. The Madigas are professional in making the leather articles, especially sandals, trappings for bullocks, and large well-buckets used for irrigation. The sandals which are prepared by the Madigs are very strong, comfortable, and highly ornamental. He paid in kind (share in the crops) or cash and sometimes they get the dead buffalo for their services”. The Madiga life connected with making of leather articles and removal of dead animals from the caste Hindu locality.

The Madigas recognized as Jambavas and claim that they descendent from Jambu or Adijambuvadu. According to Edgar Thurston and Sirajul Hasan (T. R. Singh, 1969: 4), the name “Madiga is derived from *mahadige* (the great man who has come down) or to *maha digi ra* (great man, come down). It is said that “one day, Siva and Parvathi went to vanavihara, where she got hurt by a thorn in her thigh, then she tore a portion of flesh of the thigh and hit it on the ground and it fell near the Chennagi tree. Then a boy was born out of it and was named after the tree as Chennayya. He was blessed with three voices *dasavaakku*, *visavakku* and *amritavaakku*. Parvathi finding him alone, kept a Kamadenu, a sacred cow to look after him. And later on he enjoyed the taste of the milk of cow. Then he wanted to eat the flesh of the cow hoping that it would be much tastier than its milk, on hearing this, the cow committed suicide. Then nobody could remove the corpse. On the advice of devatas Chennayya called Jambamuni.

Instead of pronounce “*Maha Tata digira*”, he called Jambamuni as “*ma digira*” as he could not uttered the sound. Because of his tongue twister and for having *visavakku*, the evil *spell the posterity of Jambavamuni become Madigas*”.

Madigas claim that Matangi is the mother goddess to the Madigas. There is a story which is related to origin of the Matangi, how she becomes as mother goddess to the Madigas and how Madigas claim they are the children of Matangi. Thurston (Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, 1987: 297-98) opined that, “the head of Renuka, the wife of the Sage Bhrigu, who was beheaded by her lord’s orders, fell in a Madiga house, and grew into a Madiga woman”. According to another legend “a certain king prayed to be blessed with a daughter, and in answer the gods sent him a golden parrot, which soon after perched on ant-hill, and disappeared into it. The disappointed father got the ant hill excavated, and was rewarded for his pains by finding his daughter rise, a maid of divine beauty, and she came to be worshipped as the Matangi”. In another version, the Matangas are an ancient line of kings who ruled somewhere in the south, and the Madigas call themselves Matangi makkalu or children of Matangi or Durga, who is their goddess”. The Madigas started celebrating Matamma as their mother goddess. Very auspiciously they celebrate Matamma *jathara* and it signifies their identity”.

Significance of Mathamma Jathara

The Mathamma *jathara* is a unique religious ritual which is celebrated by the Madiga community in Sothern districts of Andhra Pradesh, especially in Nellore and Prakasham which has been performed once in every three years. The *jathara* is decided by their caste elders (*Pedda Madiga* and elders of the Madiga). The importance of the *jathara* is not only because of she is *Kula Devatha* (the caste deity) to the Madigas, but it is celebrated by them because there was no entry to the untouchables in the temples which are located in the caste Hindu premises. The committee (which is constituted by the elders of the caste) consults the *purohit* or *pujari* (priest) to fix the days. The committee will fix and collect money from every family of Madiga community. The committee along with the elders of the community, *Pedda Golla* and *pujari* lay down *gevudu rallu* (special stones prepared with writings of chantings on them, for lay down around the caste boundaries) around the Madiga community households where they are living. The *jathara* will commence after a week on the same day in which the *gevudu rallu* (marked stones) laid down. Before going to discuss about the process of *jathara*, one

should understand the relation between the Madiga and Golla (Yadava) caste. *Pedda golla* (elder of the caste) play a vital role in all auspicious and inauspicious occasions of the Madiga community.

Relation between Madiga and Golla (Sheppard caste) caste:

Once upon a time there lived Mala and Velama caste people in the kingdom of Katamaraju to look after cattle. On his return from the forest, a man named Beeru Naidu, who had been raised by Katamaraju's father, Peddiraju, presented his queen with a child and advised her to feed the child with her right breast. After some years when Katamaraju became the king he employed Beeru Naidu and kept him along with Mala and Velama people to watch their cattle. One day, Nellore Nelasiddi Raju who was the ruler of the neighboring kingdom declares war against the Katamaraju. Despite the fact that Katamaraju has a military, he urged the people of Mala, Velama, and Madiga to join him in battle. However, Mala and Velama people refused Katamarajus' request. Madiga people have agreed to participate in the war against Nelasiddi Raju under the leadership of Beeru Naidu.

When Katamaraju received the assurance from the Beeru Naidu he became very happy. Katamaraju has presented a special sword known as '*Kongala Katthi*' for Beeru Naidu. Beeru Naidu rages over his opponents and assassinates them in battle with that sword. Unfortunately, he dies in the war. Before he dies urged Katamaraju that "keep the sword as a memorial, so that the friendship will be continued between Madiga and Golla forever". Katamaraju respects his desire and kept the sword at his thrown. From that day onwards Golla caste people act as elders to the Madiga community and look after all their auspicious and inauspicious occasions of the Madiga.

The '*Kongala Katthi*' became a sacred object for Madigas. The '*Kongala Katthi*' will be kept in the Pedda Golla house. Whenever the marriage takes place in the Madiga houses they bring the sword from the Pedda Golla house with procession to the bridegroom house. They shift the sword from bridegroom house to the Mathamma temple. There, they kept it until the marriage ceremony is over and again that it will be shifted to the *Pedda* Golla house again. Based on this legendary connection the *Pedda* Golla acted as *Pedda* (elder) to all Madiga community. *Pedda* Golla present in all occasions such as religious and marriage. He also clears the important/critical disputes within the Madigas.

The Ritual Process:

The *Jathara* starts with the decoration of Mathamma Temple and all the Madiga caste people will participate in that. Bineeduvaru (sub-caste of the Madiga community, who are professionals in storytelling) and Kommuvaru (sub-caste of the Madiga community, who are professionals in sacrificing the buffalo) come from nearest villages to perform *puja* to Mathamma. The Bineeduvaru tells the story which is connected to Mathamma or origin of Madiga community or about Mathangi and the day ends with that.

On the second day, all the Madiga caste people along with Golla, Chakali (washer men), Bineedi, Kommu and *Vetti* (the person from the Madiga community to do religious works as well as community works who is called as announcer) people go to *Putta* (termait mount) to bring *Puttabangaram* that is outside the village. Madiga clean the *Putta* and perform *Puja*. They employ the *Vetti* people to look after the *Putta*. The remaining people come back to their houses. In the meantime, the Pedda Golla gets ready with *Ganga Petti* (sacred box), *Bolliavu* (image of the sacred cow), *Veerathallu* (sacred threads) and *Kongala Katti*. The Pedda Madiga goes to Pedda Golla house to take him to the *Putta* to bring *Puttabangaram*, and it is essential to bring the *Puttabangaram* to Mathamma temple. Soon after reaching the *Putta* Madiga people decorate *Putta* and Bineeduvaru starts telling the story. When the story telling is finishes the Kommuvaru sacrifice of *Badde Gorre* (the goat which is already decorated by Kommuvaru with the help of Madiga men for the sacrifice to Mathamma) to the goddess. Once the sacrifice process is over, the *Puttabangaram* (termite mount soil) is lifted by the Madiga people and kept it on the head of Pedda Madiga, Golla carries the *Bolliavu* (sacred cow) and *Ganga Petti* and *Chakali* holds the lights in their hand and the rest of the people perform *Veerathallu* and the procession continued towards *Madigawada* (the colony of the Madigas called as Madigawada). If anybody is possessed with the spirits by performing the *Veerathallu*, they will be served with lemon or cock to bite. In that procession the centre of attraction is Matangi (Matangi is a woman who sacrificed or dedicated to the goddess from the Madiga community. She should not marry. Her life is sacrificed to the Mother goddess only) dance. At the entrance of the *Madigawada*, they perform *Eduru Veta* (sacrifice of a Goat) then the procession enters through the *Gevudu Rallu* into the colony. The procession should go to every street and every corner of the *Madigawada* before it reaches the Mathamma Temple. The second day ends with the Mathamma *Puja* followed by the story telling

On the final day morning, the Madiga women clean the temple premises and put *muggu* (kolam or floral drawings) in front of the temple. The Bineedivaaru tells the story and it continues till afternoon. The Madiga women prepare the *Pongali* (sacred food) in front of the temple and they serve the *Pongali* to Mother Goddess by the end of the story telling. The serving process is starting with *Pujari* followed by Pedda Madiga family and all the community members. At the same time, people go to *Pedda Madiga's* house to bring the buffalo which is decorated to sacrifice in front of the Matamma temple. They pour the *Pongali* into *kumbam* (heap) in front of Temple and sacrificed the buffalo. The individuals sacrifices animals (goat or buffalo) or birds (Cocks). Then, the Kommuvaru will rub off the *muggu* (kolam or floral drawings), and Madiga people have to pay the remuneration along with cocks, cloths and money to them. After this, a front leg will be separated by the Kommuvaru from the sacrificed buffalo and kept it in its mouth. The head of the buffalo should be faced to the temple. Soon after, everyone is required to leave the area since it is highly forbidden to roam because it is thought that the spirits will come to eat the sacrificed Buffalo in the night. The next day morning, the buffalo will be separated into different parts and distributed to all the Madiga families. The head and leg, which are decorated as facing the temple, are given to Pedda Madiga.

Conclusion

Madigas are basically, leather workers, village menials, drumbeaters and considered as untouchables and treated as the lowest in the caste structure. The Madigas also call themselves as Jambavas and claim to have descended from Jambu or Adi-jambuvadu. The community based researchers expressed that, Madigas are sons of Jambavantha and Mathamma and later the Mathamma become their mother goddess. Mathamma *jathara* is a biggest religious ritual among Madiga community in Sothern districts of Andhra Pradesh, especially in Nellore and Prakasham which has been performed in every three years. The *jathara* is very unique in the Madiga community because it is celebrated by the Madiga only. Golla caste will play a crucial role in their both in auspicious and inauspicious occasions.

References:

1. *Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order*, 1950 (Rules and Orders under the Constitution)
2. Y.A. Sudhakar Reddy, “The Religiosity of the Marginalized: Reflections in the Bard Tradition of Andhra Pradesh”, in *Dalits and Social Marginalization*, ed. J. Bheemaiah, Jaipur: Aavishkar Publishers, 2012, p. 43.
3. T. R, Singh, “*The Madiga: A Study in Social Structure & Change*”, Ethnographic & Folk Culture Society, U P, 1969, pp-2.
4. Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, “*Castes and Tribes of Southern India*”, Vol-IV, Asia Educational Services, New Delhi, 1987, pp-308-309.