

Madiga: Meaning, Various Names And Historical Identity

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ABSTRACT

The Madiga community is one of the Scheduled Caste communities of Karnataka and is widely distributed across the state. Historically, the community has been associated with the leather profession, but its social and cultural identity extends far beyond occupation. Madigas have been known by several names, including Madiga, Adijambava, Matanga, Panchama, Adikarnataka, Adidravida, Harijan, Depressed Class, Scheduled Caste and Dalit. These names emerged in different historical, social, administrative and cultural contexts. The origin and meaning of the word *Madiga* itself has been explained differently by dictionaries, scholars and folk traditions. This article examines the possible origins of the term Madiga, the various names associated with the community, and the historical circumstances in which these names came into use. It also highlights the importance of documenting the historical and cultural identity of the Madigas, whose contributions have often remained inadequately represented in conventional historical narratives.

Keywords: Madiga, Adijambava, Matanga, Adikarnataka, Adidravida, Panchama, Scheduled Caste, Dalit.

INTRODUCTION

The Madigas constitute one of the major Scheduled Caste communities residing in Karnataka. They are widely distributed throughout the state and are found in both rural and urban areas. The community has been identified by different names at different periods of history, reflecting changes in social organization, political circumstances, administrative classification and cultural consciousness. Among these names are Madiga, Adikarnataka, Adijambava, Matanga, Panchama, Adidravida, Harijan, Depressed Class, Scheduled Caste and Dalit.

The historical role of the Madigas has extended beyond their traditional occupation. The source notes their association with various historical movements, including the freedom struggle, Mysore State movement, Karnataka unification movement and Dalit movements. Their historical contributions, however, have not always received adequate representation in written histories. Therefore, studying the origin of their name and the various identities associated with the community is significant for understanding their social and cultural history.

2. Meaning and Origin of the Word Madiga

The origin of the word *Madiga* is not definitively established. Different dictionaries, scholars and oral traditions provide different explanations. Kannada and Telugu dictionaries primarily associate the term with the community's traditional involvement in leather work and footwear production. The Telugu dictionary, for example, associates Madiga with slipper-making and the person engaged in that occupation.

Another important interpretation connects the word *Madiga* with *Matanga*. The source observes that the term Matanga has been associated both with the elephant and with the Madiga community. The continuing use of expressions such as *Matangi Makkal* and *Matanga Brahmins* is presented as evidence supporting a possible historical relationship between the terms. However, this interpretation remains a matter of historical and linguistic consideration rather than a conclusively established fact.

T.R. Singh provides another explanation, suggesting that Madiga may have originated from *Mahadiga* or *Mahadigira*, interpreted as referring to a great person who came down. A separate folk explanation relates

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the term to the traditional responsibility of dealing with dead cattle. According to this account, expressions such as *Madigoddu* eventually contributed to the development of the term Madiga. These explanations demonstrate that the word has been interpreted through occupational, linguistic, historical and folk-cultural perspectives.

Mailahalli Revanna records a folk tradition in which Nayaka, Golla and Madiga are described as three brothers who later adopted different names and occupations. According to this tradition, Madiga was the eldest. The source also records an emotional and cultural connection between Madigas and Nayaka and Golla communities in some rural areas. Such oral traditions are valuable for understanding community memory, although they should be distinguished from documentary historical evidence.

Thus, the available explanations do not establish one universally accepted origin of the term. Rather, they demonstrate the complexity of Madiga identity and its relationship with occupational history, folklore and notions of antiquity.

3. Adijambava and Matanga

Among the important names associated with the Madiga community are *Adijambava* and *Matanga*. The source indicates that Madigas have historically identified themselves with these names, although definitive historical records concerning their earliest use are unavailable. The Sindh Madigas preserve traditions through *Madiga Aata*, *Elamma Aata*, *Sindh Katha* and *Adijambhava Purana*. These traditions narrate the birth of Adijambhava, regarded as the progenitor of the Madiga clan, and describe the subsequent division of clans.

Adijambhava therefore occupies an important position in Madiga cultural memory. The community's mythological traditions connect Adijambhava with the origins of creation and the division of clans. The name *Matanga* is also associated with these traditions. The source refers to historical evidence that some Madigas identified themselves as Matanga Brahmins during the 1891 Mysore Census, based on their traditions.

The continuing importance of Adijambava is also visible in institutional and cultural activities. The

source refers to the Adijambava Mahasamsthan monastery associated with the Adijambava Guru lineage at Kodihalli in Hiriur taluk of Chitradurga district, along with related institutions and organizations. Cultural programmes, hostels and community organizations have also used the name Adijambava. This indicates that Adijambava is not merely a mythological name but remains an important component of contemporary community identity.

4. Panchama, Adidravida and Adikarnataka

The term *Panchama* was historically used to identify communities placed outside the fourfold Varna system. Madigas and Holeyas were among the communities identified by this term. Its use became particularly visible during the period of the Mysore kings. Educational institutions such as Panchama schools and hostels were established for socially and economically backward communities. The source records the existence of a Panchama Boarding Hostel in Chitradurga city. After independence, with greater access to government educational institutions, the separate use of the term Panchama declined.

The term *Adidravida* developed in a different historical context. The source traces its emergence to Tamil Nadu and the activities of socially conscious members of oppressed communities. The Adi Dravidian Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1857, and demands were subsequently made for the recognition of the term Adi Dravida. The term later spread to parts of Karnataka and other regions. Its use, however, varied from district to district, and both Madigas and Holeyas did not use the term uniformly.

The term *Adikarnataka* similarly developed as a name associated with the original inhabitants of Karnataka. The word *Adi* means “first” or “original,” and the term therefore carried an assertion of historical belonging. The source states that the term Adikarnataka was formally proposed in 1925 at a Panchamar Sammelana held in connection with a school established at Koratagere. The government subsequently issued an order concerning the use of the term in October 1925.

The use of Adikarnataka and Adidravida varied geographically and between Madiga and Holeyas communities. This variation demonstrates that caste identity is not expressed through a single uniform

terminology but is shaped by regional social relations and historical experiences.

5. Harijan, Depressed Class, Scheduled Caste and Dalit

The term *Harijan* became widely used during the Indian independence movement. Mahatma Gandhi popularized the term, which literally conveyed the idea of “children of God.” In Karnataka, its use became prominent during the 1930s. However, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly opposed the term because he considered it inconsistent with human dignity. Subsequently, the Government of India advised the use of “Scheduled Caste” instead of Harijan in official usage, and government correspondence later discontinued the terms Harijan and Girijan.

During British rule, communities subjected to social exclusion were also identified as *Depressed Classes*. The Madiga community was included within this administrative terminology. The term *Scheduled Caste* subsequently became the formal constitutional and administrative category used for a number of historically disadvantaged communities. The source notes that government documents predominantly use Scheduled Caste as the official classification.

The term *Dalit* developed as an expression of social awareness and resistance among oppressed communities. Originating prominently in Maharashtra, the term gained wider significance through organized movements. In Karnataka, its use expanded during the 1970s, particularly through Dalit organizations involving communities such as Madigas and Holeyas. The term also became influential in literary and cultural fields.

CONCLUSION

The study of the names associated with the Madiga community reveals a complex history of identity formation. The term Madiga itself has several proposed explanations, and no single interpretation can be regarded as conclusively established on the basis of the available material. Occupational traditions, linguistic interpretations, folklore and notions of antiquity have all contributed to explanations of the term.

The various names—Adijambava, Matanga, Panchama, Adikarnataka, Adidravida, Harijan, Depressed Class, Scheduled Caste and Dalit—represent different historical stages and social contexts. Some emerged from community traditions and cultural memory, while others developed through administrative classifications, social reform movements and political mobilization. The continuing use of Adijambava and related cultural traditions demonstrates the importance of community memory, whereas the transition from terms such as Harijan and Depressed Class to Scheduled Caste and Dalit reflects broader changes in social consciousness and political identity.

Therefore, documenting the history of the Madiga community and its diverse names is important for understanding Karnataka's social and cultural history. Such documentation can contribute to a more inclusive interpretation of history by recognizing communities whose contributions have often remained inadequately represented in conventional historical narratives.

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