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## History of Leather Workers of Hyderabad and their Socio-Economic Situation in Contemporary Society

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### Abstract:

*In this paper I have chosen to study the leather workers, who are traditionally continuing their occupation and are not related to any industry or an organized sector. I preferably concentrated on men who belong to Nalgonda and Hyderabad districts of Telangana. I have thought to keep my study devoted to Madiga men belonging to the middle age group of 25-50 and their problems in daily life like meeting financial needs, family conditions and others which they are going through. Of all the case studies I have come to know that these people are unaware of any beneficial schemes provided by the government and are mainly dependent on daily wage work. They have no social security or any other future security as the occupation they have chosen does not provide any nor does the government. The financial miseries of these sectors push them into the agony of problems. As we know, financial security is something which is really important in the current scenario.*

### **1.1 METHODOLOGY:**

I have chosen to conduct a snowball sampling near my residence. I wanted to know the problems of people who work on individual bases and meet their life's requirements. I have conducted interviews of 25 male members who are the only breadwinners in the family by doing the leather work. Out of 25 samples I have considered writing 5 case studies which I felt are resembling the other conditions of workers. I preferred to conduct interviews using questionnaires so that I don't have to take a longer while but I have made sure to ask questions out of questionnaire if needed. I have used the primary data of my interviews and got the secondary data from the literature available on a few sites like J-Stor and a few newspaper articles, literature of university professors.

### **1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW:**

The books and the articles I have read gave me an idea about the culture and heritage of the Madigas. their role in the society was huge in making articles and being part of agriculture. But none of these articles talk about the problems of this community. They have only demonstrated that this community is ill treated, face discrimination and are excluded from the common society. But the tracing of the community from traditional leather workers to the current occupation is not so clear. And the sufferings of the community are never mentioned. The data regarding the number of people who continue the same occupation is hardly mentioned. I have mostly taken the help of the realistic evidence and interviews in writing this paper, Rather than solely depending on the literature available.

### **1.3 INTRODUCTION:**

Leather industry in India is one of the most important sectors for a country's economy. Is a well interlinked sector with tanning, finishing, footwear, leather garments, etc. Indian leather products have a huge international market, these leather products contribute almost 7% of export earnings. This industry also employs almost 2.5 million people with 75% of production at small scale and cottage industries. India is considered as the best place for investing in the leather industry as it has huge raw material in the form of a large cattle population and abundant supply of skilled labor. After the independence government considered the leather industry "as a traditional industry employing a large number of people" and "production within small scale units will offer maximum employment opportunities and will preserve traditional skills". As per the government's factory act, the majority of these industries remain unregulated for registration due to their smaller size production houses. Government's plan to modernize the traditional leather

industry as it was earlier dominated by rural dalits who are currently leather workers in urban areas. This industry is densely found in cluster forms in few distinct locations throughout the country. Tamil nadu is the biggest exporter of the country's leather exports (approximately 40%) and its share in the country's leather products is 70%. This industry has a strong social structure through caste and community. Large people engaged in this industry even today are from traditional leather working castes and muslim communities. We can also find children actively participating in the leather industry, but there would be no specific gender preference. Adults earn little above that of children. irrespective of skill, experience, needs the wage payments remains low and inelastic. The labor of this industry majorly comes from backward sections( lower caste and lower class). Women are employed in large numbers mainly in footwear production in athani(karnataka), rajasthan, agra, ranipet, vaniyambadi( tamil nadu). Generally formal units of leather industries set up illegal units where women are major participants. Here, women are not considered as workers in official records and are not entitled to any benefits. These women are recruited on contract basis and are engaged in all stages of the tanning process.

This industry has been heavily populated by people belonging to scheduled caste and islamic communities since ages. According to traditional Indian society working on leather is considered as a taboo. Based on the hindu religious division of people based on the occupational parameters, people indulging with leather are considered as untouchables and are exiled from the dvija communities. These leather working communities in South India are known by the names of regional jati like Madigas in Andhra Pradesh; Chakkilians in Tamilnadu; Madiga, Mochi and Samagara in Karnataka; and Tolkollans in Kerala. These communities are considered lowest of the low in social hierarchy.

In this paper we are going to study the transformation in the lives of leather workers belonging to andhra pradesh and telangana selectively hyderabad, who have been leather workers in traditional occupational division (Madigas) and continuing the same in the current modern sphere. Where we can notice the changes in their lifestyle with changes in the caste system and the introduction of industrialisation. Though Telangana tops the list of states in consumption of meat, but not in the skin processing units and tanneries. There are only three tanneries currently working in Telangana, while all the skin is exported to Tamil Nadu. Being a large storehouse of cattles and around 360 slaughterhouses, Telangana has a potential to become the top producer of lather products. Due to strict pollution norms and restrictions only three tanneries are functioning in Telangana, that too is located in Kunoor Bhongir district.

#### 1.4 MADIGA Community

The brahmanical social order of Hinduism envisions a society split into the four varnas of brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudras. There are also the other social groups known as chandalas or panchamas, which are strongly represented. In the post-colonial era, these populations preferred to refer to themselves as "dalits". These people are impacted with a variety of challenges as a result of their low social and ritual position. They are socially and economically exploited, subject to discrimination, denied access to education, and marginalized politically by dvija groups. According to numerous literary and inscriptional sources, tanning and leather work were recognised as prominent crafts in ancient India. The tanning of leather, manufacturing of leather articles and shoe making became the source of untouchability and made the people doing these occupations as predominant communities. Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata demonstrate the immense use of leather as hand guard, shields, cuirass and breastplate and sword sheath etc. In the peasant agrarian system, these groups of people are compelled to live in the hamlets outside the village, far from the dominant group.

Madiga as a community has a highly evolved social structure. There are various groups in the so-called Madiga caste doing various occupations like narrating various versions of puranas, performing traditional martial arts, singing songs etc. As suppliers of leather goods, leather workers had strong linkages to other forward-thinking communities and played a significant part in the agrarian economy. By extracting the skins from the community cattle's carcasses and traditional methods of tanning the hides. These Madigas serve as one of the twelve Ayagaras in the conventional Ayagar system. As a result, they are given an imam or can rent free land. In the traditional agrarian economy, these leather workers belong to farming families to whom they have to supply the leather products required like ropes, sandals, buckets and also provide help during the harvest period. In exchange for these services, they were given dead calf carcasses, a bundle of unthreshed grain, a quantity of grain, and food on special occasions like weddings and festivals.

The Madiga people had their own clan deities, including Renuka, Ellamma, Matangi, and Arundhathi. Some of the women are also given to the gods as Matangis and Basavis, who engage in sacred prostitution, by these people. Few are as devoted as asadis, musicians who recite tales about the native goddesses, such as Yellamma and Mariamma. Despite being included in mainstream hinduism, these individuals are never awarded honorable positions, granted access to holy sites, or permitted in rituals. nDespite their social marginalization, they have connections to past cultural and religious movements.



The egalitarian and revolutionary ideas of the socio-religious reform groups sought to improve the social standing of leather workers. Buddhism was the first religion to embrace leather workers as members. Christian beliefs have a significant impact on communities who work with leather. With their purpose to spread the word of God, missionaries criticized social ills such as the caste system, untouchability, etc. As many people as it could admit were given equal standing. Their social programmes have drawn the dalit populations, leading to ardent conversions to Christianity on their part. John E. Clough, renowned as the "kingdom builder of south India," was more successful among leather-working Madigas. These missionaries had a significant impact on the madigas' awareness.

### **1.5 Traditional Economy of Leather Working Madigas:**

The occupation of tanning and leather work were specialized and recognised as craft in early india. Rigveda mentions various types of leather items for carrying various items, musical instruments, garments, straps etc. the use of skin for clothing is mentioned in Satapatha brahmana. Manusmriti curiously mentions about the gifting of shoes to the teacher by the students after completion of their education, punishments given for the damaging and stealing of leather items. Manu opines that karwar, who works in leather, is the union of nishada men and vaideha women. The Madigas are the great leather working caste of telugu country” (Edgar Thurston and Rangachari). Initial reference of leather worker community was mentioned in prakrit on Amaravati stupa referring to a gift of slab with overflowing vase by the charmakara vidhika. These leather workers of telugu region are called charmakaras but later on based on literary and epigraphical sources from the medieval period these are considered as Madigas. Though the etymology of the name Madiga is uncertain. We can also find the same Madiga groups in both Tamil nadu and karnataka. Based on the language spoken by these communities the telugu and kannada people do not intermarry but the people of tamil nadu and telugu states have a good relationship with each other. Madigas have migrated to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka regions during the medieval period due to the political turmoil along with their patronizing cultivating communities as they are strongly tied to their traditional patron. The technology of Madigas till the modern period was orally transmitted from generation to generation. Madigas are considered as ‘ancient scientists’ due to their ability to process tanning the hides using trial and error methods for several centuries. Benjamin Heyne, danish surgeon, explored telugu regions and found that tanning leather was a job of women and manufacturing and marketing a shoe or other products is a job of her husband. The household tanning and dyeing is replaced by industries in south india especially in andhra pradesh, madras,

ranipet, etc. the traditional tanners became the workforce in industries to earn their livelihood as they were unable to compete with mechanized processes.

**1.5.1. Madigas in Footwear Manufacturing:** Though footwear is used by humans from time immemorial. A famous telugu text of the fifteenth century named ‘ kridabhiramam’ mentions leather chappals which make music at each step called “kirru cheppulu” which are worn by people of high status. And also the important work written by emperor sri Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagara “amuktamalyada” mentions about leather footwear and the importance of tangedu leaves in the leather work and varieties of footwear like metlu( stepped) , godugu pavulu ( umbrella chappal), orrachulu ( country footwear) and ekavaru cheppulu( single sheeted footwear). Huizinga , a christian missionary from ongole, says “ the Madiga’s sandals are strong, comfortable and highly ornamental. His manner of working and tools are as simple as his life”.

Nowadays, we hardly see Madigas involved in tanning the lather and making chappals in rural areas. Industrialisation and corporatization of tanning and shoe making industries took away their livelihood. Many of them joined as industrial laborers and others opened their own small manufacturing unit. Most of them left their profession and a few are occupied in polishing and repairing work at urban centers. In ancient days leather bags are used to hold liquids like water, ghee, oil etc. one of such instance is mentioned by Navarrete, a spanish dominican missionary visited Masulipatnam and Golconda in the last decade of 17th century, mentions about his purchase of leather bag which he bought to store water. He explains its benefits as the water poured into it gets cooler in a couple of hours and is considered as worth the money he spent. These leather bags are considered the best refrigerators with regards to liquids. In the current situation these leather bottles, bags,pots are replaced by tins, rubbers, plastics.

**1.5.2. Madigas in Agrarian Economy:** As an ayagar madigas are given a piece of land to cultivate free of tax and are attached to families of agriculturists of the village. The role of Madigas in regional agriculture is immense. To provide irrigation in upland areas two methods are used named kapile and yatam which are only possible by the leather buckets designed by Madigas (stitching the leather into round shape). Kapil was a south indian bullock lift with a big bucket of leather on an inclined plane. Which fills and empties the bucket at regular intervals based on the periodic motion of bullocks. Yatam is a balanced mechanism. Which works like a seesaw with a water bucket made of leather and weights( stones) on the other end balanced by a man or two. And the other popularly known basket of triangular shape called gooda fixed with two leather straps on either side operated by two men to fill and drain water. These Madigas not only provide these equipment but also attend to their repairs when required. We can see they play

a vital role indirectly in irrigating the agriculture fields and in return they get very little out of their services.

**1.5.3. Madigas Services to Village:** The role of Madiga as a servant of the village is huge. He acts as an information distributor in the village, which is also called 'chatimpu' with the help of his traditional musical instrument called 'dappu'. In a few villages Madigas are considered as village watchmen known as 'talaris' which makes them perform activities like being a guide or carrying loads. The presence of Madigas is considered mandatory in festivals conducted in honor of village deities and they have to beat tom-toms near the image of the goddess. The festivals of village deities are mostly associated with sacrifice of goats and buffaloes. The Madigas are called to kill the buffalo with the sacrificial chopper on the last day of the festival. The community head of Madigas has to offer a buffalo head with its foreleg to the goddess. The rice soaked with blood of animals kept in a basket the Madigas have to travel by taking this basket around the village followed by another male of the village who cries 'poli, poli' sprinkling on the ground as he goes. The Madigas get their share of meat after the festival. However, these festivals are no more celebrated due to governments restrictions on animal sacrifice. Hence, the Madigas importance on these occasions was lessened.

**1.5.4. Contribution of Madigas in Industry:** Leather tanned by Madigas is used in native traditional iron smelting industry. A part of them are exported to persia for the manufacture of swords. Kancha Illaiah stated that the leather blowpipe involved an important principle of physics that empty space sucks in air. The blowpipe sucks in air from the atmosphere and pushes it in a controlled manner into the hearth. Madigas discovered such an air pumping mechanism several millennia back and applied this method to blowpipes in order to advance the production process and develop advanced technology of production". Productive and service caste used certain leather articles manufactured by leather workers. Leather sheaths were supplied to carpenters, stone cutters and sculptors to protect their hands and leather bags to carry instruments. The toddy tappers use leather waist belts, leather covering to their ropes to support them while climbing the trees. They also supply the shepherds with waist belts and small sbags to keep flints and leather water bottles. In the current situation these leather materials are replaced by rubber and plastic items. Hence, these articles are hardly manufactured by Madigas.

**1.5.5. Madigas Contribution in Musical Instruments:** Madiga manufactures many percussion instruments which have leatherheads. Tappeta or dappu was a characteristic musical instrument of caste. This instrument was used for dhindora in the village and in festivals associated with little traditions. Madigas also manufactures musical instruments like ramdhola

(big drum for proclamation in villages) which is also used in performing in oggu katha. They also make musical instruments locally called as titti, kommu, jamidika, mridangam, dolu, tabla and baya, dolak, nagara, bheri, dundubhi, damru etc. all these instruments are used in temples, festivals, rituals. It is highly thoughtful that though the leather instruments are used inside the temple but the manufacturer of the same leather instruments are considered as untouchables and dirty.

### 1.6. CASE STUDIES:

To study the current scenario of traditional leather workers in telangana state, i have decided to take a few interviews near my residential area through snowball sampling. I have mainly concentrated on those men and women who were traditional leather workers by caste and occupation, and currently working in the same type of job. Many people belonging to the Madiga community, though their ancestors were leather workers, currently prefer doing white collar or other jobs in both informal and formal sectors. They don't prefer continuing the same job in today's world as it is looked down upon. These are the case studies i have done:

**Case Study-1:** I have talked to a person named Saidulu, aged 65, who is a leather worker by caste and profession. He has learnt the craft of leather working from his father and grandfather. His ancestors earned their livelihood by making leather products to specific households ( an upper caste families) and working on their agricultural land whenever needed. During the times of his ancestors the need of leather products was huge and it directly or indirectly acted as a good bread earner for a family. But in the modern period the leather products have been replaced by plastic and rubber articles. Which made the leather workers compromise on their bread earning opportunity. Today, Saidulu at the age of 65 works as a cobbler and a shoemaker near a bus stop. He could hardly earn 100 rupees a day as he receives very few customers, though he has few customers; they only come for minor repairs in their footwear. Saidulu has 3 children,(2 daughters and a son) as his earnings were quite low he couldn't send their children to school but had to send them for daily wage works in the nearby areas to meet their daily needs and provide food for each of them twice a day. Saidulu had to take out a bank loan to get his daughters married. Being unable to pay the bank loan and unaware of the schemes he can avail from the government he had to sell his house, which he got from his ancestors in order to clear the loan. As he couldn't provide any education to his son he ended up as a daily wage laborer in the construction sector. Saidulu couldn't transfer his skills of leather craft to his son as he felt it had no future anymore. The traditional artistic skills of leather crafts are not found in the coming future, as they are replaced by other products. In the saidulu's case we see he has lost his major source of employment, he is no longer



bound to the selective upper caste families as they are no more dependent on leather products and not even considered as agricultural labor during peak season as most of the work is done by machinery. Saidulu can only be able to manage his daily needs with the help of ration he receives every month by the government. Without this it will be more difficult for him to satisfy the hunger of his entire family. For any medical help needed to himself or his family members saidulu is wholly dependent on government hospitals. During the covid times, his wife being affected by coronavirus, he had to go to the private hospital to provide better treatment for her, for which he had to take loan from his relatives. Though after trying very hard in providing best treatment he lost his wife due to low immunity power. The lack of financial security and health benefits in the times needed, lack of awareness and illiteracy pushes many people like saidulu who still trace their ancestral occupations into darkness.

**Case Study-2:** In the other case study, where I met a person named Ram, age 34, a dalit leather sheet dealer. His ancestors have been doing the same occupation since 1955 in Hyderabad. He has been selling a raw leather sheet of 10 foot length for 500 rupees till 2019. But now after the high Courts judgment regarding strict ban under the environment protection rules and the water prevention and control of pollution act on the functioning of leather tanneries at leather complexes. Resulted in reduction of their sales as the industries were uncertain about their functioning. The hitting of covid lockdown acted as a fast mobiliser towards losses and it put the market shut for a longer period of time. This made the raw leather sheets get rotten and those sheets which were sold for 500 are now currently sold for 40 rupees. Currently ram is running at a loss of 10 lakhs and planning to quit the business as he sees no future. Many of the people who were the raw leather sheet dealers ( started around 1947) after doing the same job for two to three generations have chosen to do other business. The same business from 1947 till 2015 was growing in heaps and bounds bringing huge profits to those who have taken up this business. But now the increased taxes on this business and the increased GST to be paid (5% on raw leather sheets), demonetization, lockdown had almost forced these dealers to keep their markets shut and immense increase in the stock at the godown. The harsh policies of the government pushed the communities which require more help to stand still into helplessness and increased both economical and job insecurity among dalits (leather workers).

**Case Study-3:** I have talked to a person named Seenu, age 40. Whose parents are home based leather workers and Agriculturists. Seenu who had learnt artistic skill of leather works couldn't follow the same path as his parents but didn't choose to leave his passion so he started working in a leather industry as a leather handler in a tannery unit. He lost both his eyes during an accident at

the unit. Where the acid splashed on his face. Currently his 18 year old daughter works at a footwear factory. He also shared that the workers of the tannery often suffer from fever, eye inflammation, skin disease, cancer as they work with toxic chemicals and have no safety protection or training. He also shared a tragic incident where two of his co-workers died and three of them hospitalized after inhaling toxic gasses from a leather effluent unit.

There are many reports published which show regular accidents at tannery where operators get trapped in the machinery, suffocation of workers who are employed to clean the underground waste tanks due to toxic fumes, drowning of workers in toxic sludges. There are numerous cases of abuse towards women and children in the leather industry which need immediate action.

Though India being the world's second producer of leather footwear and garments which are major exports, no proper attention is paid to the nature and quality of the employment created and the workers working conditions. The workers of the leather industry mainly have no social Security cover such as state health insurance, pensions, and low earnings. The condition of Seenu is so severe that he had to be dependent on his young daughter for his daily needs. His daughter earns 5000 per month with which they can hardly manage their daily needs and medication for himself. He finds himself a burden to his daughter as his current situation has forced her to take up employment rather than continuing her studies.

**Case Study-4:** A person named Lakshman, aged 47, belongs to a low caste dalit family, his parents were traditional leather workers. He was discriminated against at school at the early stages of his life and chose to end up education and choose the same life as his father. So he learnt the craft from his father and started helping his father in his occupation from a very early age. Due to less dependence on leather products by common people he had started facing an income crisis and difficulty to meet his family needs. Soon he met a contractor who collects the finished leather products from the Shoemakers and pays the amount based on the unit of manufactures. He also provides raw materials if needed but deducts the amount of raw materials from the finished products. Lakshman started working with the contractor when he was 27 and still he continues to work. The low earnings from this job forced Lakshman to take up credits from the same contractor at different times in his life which made him bound to sell his products only to that contractor and dissolved his power of price allocation to the products. Recently, Lakshman had to take huge credit from the contractor to meet the medical expenses of his wife, who was suffering from cancer. The regular doctor consultation and escorting his wife to the doctor made him tired. The mental trauma he was going through showed a large impact on his work. Previously he could manufacture around 500 units of footwear but in his current situation he could Hardly manufacture 100 units. Which

is making his contractor gain more power over laksham. And making him feel guilty about his loan, low efficiency, and his ill wife.

**Case Study-5:** Raju, age 30, belonging to a Madiga community couldn't complete his education. His parents were leather workers. The low paid jobs at village level had forced their family to migrate to a nearby town. Where he along with his brother work at a leather factory. As it was easy to get a job there and many of his fellow slum dwellers work over there. In a course of time raju had established his own family, he is the only breadwinner in his family. The factory where he works is situated near the residential area. There have been many complaints raised by the residents of that area regarding the malodor, water pollution caused by the factory and the toxins it releases. But in 2015 the government had planned to take an action against this factory and asked the owner of the factory to come to a conclusion with the residents, but this couldn't happen then in a month the government had closed this industry and removed all the workers with no information and social Security. This made Raju to search for immediate employment to meet his family needs. Then he chose to be an auto driver. Where he earns better than his previous job and is less risky comparatively. Though he is offered with no social security and insurance, he could manage somehow.

## 1.7. CONCLUSION

The traditional leather workers have faced lots of discrimination in the past and made them excluded from the normal communities which had made them victims of low standard of living. Though they have toiled hard in impressing their lords by hard work, their positions never changed. After their hard toils they are treated the same. Though they provide the entire village with the most useful leather items like buckets, sandals, musical instruments etc they are still considered as untouchables. since ages their position in the society remained the same. The social stigma they have gone through has made them consider themselves as inferiors or alien to society. Though the leather workers were the first recognised artists of Indian society. They had a huge role in contributing towards society. The people belonging to the Madiga community in telangana are highly exploited by the local landlords and higher caste and are never given opportunities to nurture themselves and stand by themselves. There have been many movements conducted where the people of Madiga and mala have fought together against the oppression of these communities.

These leather workers had many inspiring personalities, politicians, and leaders who stood with them for being recognised as human and treated as one. After a lot of struggles and encouraging initiatives taken by dr.BR. AMBEDKAR the life of many dalits have changed but few remained

the same. The dalits who ever continued the same way of life by making leather products and agriculturists. They have undergone a huge trauma as they couldn't satisfy their nutritional needs, economic needs, medical needs and many others. Though the era has changed, industrialisation has changed the country of India, which is highly known for its rural nature, into an urban multi diversified country. The position of dalits have hardly changed. Still we find many dalits being occupied as domestic workers, daily wage laborers, sanitary workers, etc mostly considered as undignified jobs according to Indian context and are lowly paid. Many circumstances like this have made the dalits only work to get two meals a day by making them think of a better life and higher education as achievable dreams.

Now let's concentrate on the selective occupation we have chosen, the leather workers who chose to continue their ancestral jobs. Though the leather industry being the huge contributor of the economy to India the major role is played by the capitalistic establishments. Currently there is no recognition given to the traditional leather workers, they have just ended up as the road side cobblers, contract based leather workers, home based leather workers, or workers in a large industrial unit. All these sections of people face many biases in their day to day life. These people come under the section below the poverty line of the government. They cannot afford the education of their children mostly as it is difficult for them to have food twice a day if they send their children to schools. Though they want to get their children educated and push them forward in life, their economic and social conditions directly or indirectly turn their children into a dropout from school or college and end up as an ordinary daily or low wage worker. These groups of people are highly ridden to diseases like skin cancer, tuberculosis, anemia and other hazardous health problems whose cure is time taking and expensive. Though the government tries to find solutions by providing health schemes, these are no so very beneficial. As the requirement for this section of people is high. The social discrimination this community faces is based on the varna system of hindu society which made them excluded from the common society and made them consider themselves as servants to the upper castes. And built inferiority complex in them and made themselves put off from the opportunities of life where they can have a good life. The role of religion though they have felt backward and ill by the hindu religion. But the intervention of christianity had changed their lives and shown them what equality feels like and had provided them a platform for education. The reservation policies of independent India had made them move forward in their lives. But those people who have chosen to take up the same occupation receive no proper help from the government and no other help which gives them little security about their or their families life.



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