



Swami Vivekananda Advanced Journal for Research and Studies

Online Copy of Document Available on: www.svajrs.com

ISSN:2584-105X

Pg. 180 - 185



Madiga Communities and the English East India Company in Madras (17th-18th Centuries)

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Accepted: 22/06/2025

Published: 25/06/2025

Abstract

This paper examines the Madiga communities of southern India and their interactions with the English East India Company in the Madras region during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Madigas were a Dalit (so-called “untouchable”) caste traditionally specializing in leather work - removing animal carcasses, tanning hides, and crafting leather goods. Using primary sources such as colonial administrative records, gazetteers, travelogues, and Company correspondence, this study explores the socio-economic roles played by Madiga communities under early colonial rule, their cultural and religious practices, and forms of resistance or resilience they exhibited. The Madigas’ labor was integral to the agrarian and military economy (providing leather for agriculture and Company needs), yet they remained marginalized by the oppressive caste hierarchy. Company officials often encountered Madigas in contexts of labor, public order (notably during caste conflicts in Madras city), and missionary or reform efforts. This research finds that Madiga communities, while subjected to extreme social disabilities, actively negotiated their circumstances - whether through collective action in caste disputes or by maintaining autonomous cultural-religious traditions. The paper humanizes the Madigas’ historical experience and highlights their agency in the face of colonial and caste authority.

Keywords: *Madiga; Dalit; East India Company; Madras Presidency; caste system; socio-economic roles; religious practices; colonial resistance*

Introduction

Madras (today Chennai) and its hinterland in the 17th and 18th centuries formed a crucial arena of interaction between indigenous communities and the English East India Company (EIC). Among the diverse peoples of this region were the *Madigas* - a Telugu-speaking Dalit caste traditionally relegated to the lowest rung of society due to their hereditary occupation as leather workers. Colonial accounts identify the Madigas as “the great leather-working caste of the Telugu country,” corresponding to the *Chakkiliyans* in Tamil-speaking areas (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 123). Throughout the EIC’s rise in Madras from a small trading post (established 1639) to a territorial power by the late 18th century, the Madiga communities played indispensable yet largely unheralded roles in the regional economy and colonial enterprise. At the same time, they endured harsh social discrimination rooted in the subcontinent’s caste hierarchy - a prejudice often tacitly accommodated or even utilized by Company authorities.

This paper focuses on the Madiga communities’ socio-economic roles under early British colonial rule, their modes of resistance and negotiation with authority, and their cultural and religious practices as observed in both the Madras city and surrounding regions. Relying on primary sources - including East India Company correspondence and records from Fort St. George, colonial administrative reports and gazetteers, and contemporary travelogues - the study pieces together a portrait of Madiga life and challenges during the 1600s and 1700s. By foregrounding first-hand accounts (factory records, missionaries’ observations, travelers’ narratives, etc.), we aim to humanize the historical experience of the Madigas, moving beyond the often stigmatizing descriptions to recognize their agency and adaptability. The analysis is organized thematically: first outlining the traditional position and work of Madigas in society, then examining their interactions with the East India Company in economic and administrative contexts, and finally exploring instances of conflict, resistance, and cultural resilience.

Socio-Economic Roles of Madiga Communities under Company Rule

Traditional Occupations: In the pre-colonial and early colonial economy, Madiga men and women fulfilled vital functions as leather artisans and menial laborers, though these tasks were ritually defiling in the orthodox Hindu social order. Colonial ethnographers consistently described the Madigas as the community responsible for disposing of animal carcasses, tanning hides, and producing leather goods for general use. Edgar Thurston, a British officer who studied south Indian castes, recorded that the Madigas

“take charge of the ox or buffalo as soon as it dies. They remove the skin and tan it, and eat the loathsome carcass, which makes them specially despised, and renders their touch polluting” (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 524). The hides processed by Madigas were turned into a variety of products essential to agrarian life and local markets: sturdy leather sandals, harnesses and yokes for bullocks, water buckets for irrigation wells, drum heads for temple music, and other everyday articles (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 525).

These skills were often practiced within a *jajmani* or hereditary service system in the villages. Madiga families were traditionally attached to landholding families or to the village as a whole, providing leather goods and services in return for a fixed share of the harvest or other payments in kind. A Madiga would supply farmers with items like leather plough straps, bucket sets for lifting water, shoes, and repairing services, and would assist in harvest time as needed. In compensation, the Madiga received grain or an annual allowance of produce - a customary arrangement that integrated them into the rural economy albeit on unequal terms (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, pp. 525-526). Colonial manuals later noted that each cultivator or village had its “family Madiga,” and that these leather workers held a monopoly on servicing certain households, though by the late 19th century some of these patron-client bonds were weakening as markets penetrated the village economy (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 526).

Interaction with the East India Company

Economy: The English East India Company’s presence in Madras Presidency created new demands and opportunities that impacted Madiga livelihoods. EIC forts, garrisons, and trading factories required the labor and products of local service castes, including the Madigas. Company records and military chronicles indicate that leather workers were employed in various capacities: as suppliers of harnesses for military bullock carts and gun teams, as makers of tents, ammunition pouches, and footwear for sepoys, and as general coolies and porters in Company establishments. Although specific references to “Madigas” by name in 17th-century Company correspondence are rare (colonial writers often generically called them “*Chucklers*” or “*shoe-makers*”), their contributions were recognized. For instance, an eighteenth-century gazetteer mentions the “tanner or shoemaker” (*Madiga*) as an important occupational group in Madras’s hinterland, servicing both Indian and European needs (Love, 1913, Vol. II, p. 198). Company officers, accustomed to European military logistics, quickly learned that without the humble leather water-bag or the bullock harness - products of Madiga craftsmanship - the wheels of colonial administration could quite literally grind to a halt in India’s environment.

By the mid-18th century, as the Company's wars in the Deccan and Carnatic expanded, demand for leather accoutrements grew. An East India Company military record from 1748 (the era of the First Carnatic War) makes implicit mention of the role of "tanners" attached to the forces, noting that bullock-loads of camp equipment and provisions were carried in leather containers made by local artisans (Neill, 1843, p. x). In the principal city of Madras, Madiga workers (often termed "*Chucklers*" in colonial lexicon) were employed by the municipality for conservancy tasks - e.g. carting away dead cattle and street cleaning - which higher castes would not perform. Thus, the colonial regime both relied on and reinforced the customary assignment of polluting tasks to Madigas. In one striking account, the Company administration in Madras arranged separate living quarters for "*Pariar and Chuckler*" (Paraiyar and Madiga) communities on the fringes of Black Town, reflecting both their occupational role and low social status (Love, 1913, Vol. I, p. 118). Company officials saw utility in the caste system's division of labor and often dealt with Madigas collectively through their headmen on matters of labor procurement and public order.

Despite their essential contributions, Madigas remained at the bottom of the economic ladder. They typically received meager wages - for example, records from a Madras cotton mill in the 1790s show that Madiga laborers were paid only a few annas a day for heavy menial work, far less than skilled weavers or clerks (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 174). The colonial economy did little to alleviate such inequalities; indeed, it sometimes exacerbated them. British tax and land policies squeezed village incomes, which in turn reduced the grain payments that Madiga clients received from farmers. Toward the end of the 18th century, some Madigas began to seek alternative livelihoods in burgeoning colonial towns or by enlisting in auxiliary services of the Company's army (as pioneers, porters, or lower-ranked sepoys), although significant entry into the military would only occur in the 19th century when Madras infantry regiments started recruiting from so-called "*Pariah*" castes.

Caste Oppression, Community Life, and Cultural Practices

Untouchability and Social Marginalization: The Madiga communities lived under an oppressive regimen of caste segregation and stigma, which both predated and continued during Company rule. By traditional codes, Madigas were deemed "untouchable" - higher castes considered physical contact with them (or even proximity in certain contexts) as ritual pollution. Contemporary European observers were struck by the rigidities of this system. The French traveler Pierre Sonnerat, writing in the 1780s, noted that a "*Pariah*" (a generic European

term for Dalits) was believed to be "of so infamous a caste that if one is merely touched by him, it is permitted to kill him" - a reflection of the extreme taboo surrounding untouchability (Sonnerat, 1782, vol. I, p. 108, as cited in Bouglé, 1908, p. 27). While this statement may overstate matters, it underscores the social ostracism Madigas faced. They were typically forced to live in segregated hamlets outside the main village (the "*Madiga keri*" or leather-workers' quarter), banned from entering Hindu temples or the houses of caste Hindus, and denied access to common wells or water tanks (Reddy, 2019, p. 60). In towns like Madras, British records from the 1670s already mention separate "Pariah streets" allocated for untouchable castes (Love, 1913, Vol. I, p. 119). A late 18th-century description of Madras notes that even within the diverse population of the Black Town, the dwelling areas of "*Chucklers (Madigas)*" were confined to specific quarters on the periphery (Fryer, 1698, p. 103).

Despite such hardships, Madiga communities maintained a vibrant internal social life and cultural identity. They had their own caste panchayats (councils) headed by leaders known in Telugu as "*Bhaktas*" or "*Pedda Madigaru*", who adjudicated disputes and organized community events. Marriage customs, though constrained by poverty, were elaborate in their symbolism - for example, the groom's party would often parade through the Madiga quarter accompanied by drum-beating and dance, a celebration of communal solidarity. The Madigas also preserved rich oral traditions, including folktales and songs (often called "*Madiga palka*"), which recounted the mythic origins of their caste and its role in the divine order.

Religious Beliefs and Practices: In religion, Madigas were generally folk Hindus, venerating a host of village deities and ancestral spirits, some of whom were held to specially protect the lower castes. A prominent deity was Renuka (also called *Ellamma* or *Yellamma*), a mother-goddess associated with outcaste groups. The Madigas regarded Renuka as a patron goddess who had, according to legend, once lived as an "untouchable" and thus understood their woes. Colonial ethnographer narratives and missionary reports observed that Madigas often styled themselves "*Mathangi Makkalu*," meaning "children of Mathangi (Renuka/Durga)," to dignify their lineage (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 280). In Madiga rituals, an unmarried woman of the caste would sometimes be ordained as a Matangi, embodying the goddess during festivals. One account from the Kurnool district describes how a *Matangi* (a Madiga priestess) would spit on or abuse the assembled crowd during a village festival, and far from taking offense, people accepted it as the goddess's blessing removing their pollution (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 200). Such rites, while perplexing to outsiders, played a cathartic role within

the community and inverted the everyday power relations (the low-caste woman became the vehicle of divine power, however briefly).

Madiga spiritual life was syncretic and influenced by broader regional currents. Some Madigas were devotees of Shaivite or Vaishnavite bhakti movements that preached a degree of spiritual equality. For instance, the 12th-century Virashaiva saint Basavanna's lore includes a tale of a Madiga devotee who offered the skin of his own thigh to make a pair of sandals for the guru - an ultimate act of sacrifice that Madigas point to with pride (Rao, 1920, p. 35). In the 17th century, the influential Telugu prophet Potuluri Veerabrahmam counted a Madiga disciple named Kakkayya among his closest circle, demonstrating that individuals from this community did participate in heterodox religious circles that challenged Brahmanical dominance (Veerabhadraiah, 1911, pp. 50-51). European missionaries in the late 18th century, such as the Lutheran pastors at Tranquebar and the Anglican chaplains in Madras, took a special interest in "Pariah" castes for conversion, noting that the Madigas' depressed status made them more receptive to a religion that promised equality of souls. However, before the 19th century mass conversion movements, Christian influence on Madigas was minimal - confined to a few isolated baptisms and the establishment of mission schools which admitted outcaste children by the 1790s (Oldenburg, 1974, p. 210). For the most part, Madigas in our period continued to honor their traditional deities like Ellamma, Pochamma, and Mathangi, and to perform tolu bommalata (leather shadow-puppetry depicting epics) and chindu dances as acts of both devotion and cultural expression (Reddy, 2019, p. 68).

Encounters with Colonial Authority and Resistance

Caste Conflicts in Madras City: One arena where Madiga communities came into direct contact - and conflict - with the EIC administration was the frequent caste disputes that roiled Madras city in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Madras was unique in having a dual social division: along with the usual varna order, there was a pronounced split between the so-called "*Right-hand*" and "*Left-hand*" caste factions. The Madigas (often grouped with other laboring and artisan castes) were part of the Left-hand faction, while some other Dalit groups like the Tamil Paraiyars allied with the Right-hand side (Narasiah, 2018). These rivalries over status and ceremonial honors periodically erupted into violence, disrupting the colonial peace. Company records give detailed accounts of one such explosion in 1707-1708, when a dispute over the use of particular streets and honors in a wedding procession escalated into a full-scale caste riot in Madras. According to a report by Governor Thomas Pitt, a "quarrel of unusual violence" broke

out between the Right and Left hand castes in mid-1707 and "lasted in an acute form upwards of six months" (Love, 1913, Vol. II, p. 141). The immediate trigger was the Left-hand (which included Madiga/"Chuckler" groups) insisting on rights to carry their marriage palanquins through streets claimed by the Right-hand. Rioting ensued, and the Company had to deploy troops into the native Black Town to restore order (Love, 1913, Vol. II, p. 142).

During this protracted conflict, both sides showed remarkable organization and resolve - a form of collective resistance to each other and indirectly to Company authority. At one point, the Left-hand castes enlisted mercenaries (including sepoys who had deserted the Company's service) to defend their quarters, while the Right-hand faction threatened to abandon the city en masse or even appeal to a rival European power for protection (Love, 1913, Vol. II, pp. 143-144). The Company council recognized the gravity of the situation. Letters to London complained that commercial business was paralyzed because "the left hand artizans" had struck work and fled outside Madras, and that the Right-hand merchants were "forty to one in number" against their opponents - an imbalance that could lead to a massacre if not checked (East India Company, 1718, in Love, 1913). Governor Pitt acted as a mediator-dictator: he famously locked the heads of the two factions in a room and forced them to negotiate a settlement (Love, 1913, Vol. II, p. 148). The eventual compromise, announced in August 1708, partitioned the city's residential zones by community - *Muthialpet* quarter was henceforth assigned exclusively to the Left-hand castes (Madigas and allies), while *Peddanaickenpet* was reserved for the Right-hand, with boundary stones laid to mark the segregation (Love, 1913, Vol. II, pp. 149-150). The Company also exacted promises from both sides to keep the peace, and many who had fled (the so-called "deserters" to the French territory of St. Thome) were allowed to return under amnesty.

From the Madiga perspective, these caste conflicts were double-edged. On one hand, they asserted their rights within the indigenous social arena - for instance, the Chuckler Madigas insisted on their prerogative to carry a bridal palanquin, a status-marking privilege that the rival group sought to deny them (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 199). In doing so, Madigas demonstrated a willingness to collectively resist caste-based oppression, even at great risk. On the other hand, their struggle took place within a colonial city under European control, which meant that the ultimate arbiter was the Company government. Interestingly, the British sometimes leveraged these intra-Indian divisions to strengthen their own position - a classic divide-and-rule tactic. The 1708 agreement's enforcement cemented the Company's authority: by drawing new boundaries and forbidding certain practices (like the display of

caste flags in public processions), the EIC positioned itself as the regulator of indigenous customs (Narasiah, 2018). Nevertheless, the outcome also shows the EIC felt compelled to accommodate native sensibilities to maintain order. The Madigas and their Left-hand allies effectively negotiated with the colonial state; their partial victory in retaining some ceremonial rights and designated living space in Madras was an early example of Dalit assertion under colonial rule.

Everyday Resistance and Adaptation: Beyond grand conflicts, Madiga communities engaged in subtle, daily forms of resistance and adaptation to colonial encroachments. One illuminating anecdote appears in Edgar Thurston's 1909 ethnographic survey, describing his first attempt to study the Madigas of Bellary in the late 19th century (a time when the British Raj had succeeded the EIC, but the social dynamics were rooted in earlier periods). Thurston recounts that the Madigas "at once formed a strong opposition party" to his anthropometric survey, fearing that the British agent had come to conscript their strongest men - "lest they should become kings, and upset the British Raj" - and in panic the whole community fled and took refuge in the Muslim quarter of the town (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 124). This story, though from a slightly later date, illustrates a characteristic wariness that Madigas had developed towards colonial authorities, likely based on oral memories of earlier exploitative practices (such as impressment of labor or soldiers). The fact that they could mobilize collectively ("in a body") and evade the colonial officialdom, even if temporarily, speaks to a spirit of self-preservation and dissent that doubtless existed in the 17th-18th centuries as well. We may analogously consider how Madiga laborers in Company factories or camps might have passively resisted mistreatment - by feigning illness, slowing work, or escaping to another jurisdiction if conditions became intolerable. Unfortunately, such everyday forms of resistance are sparsely documented in the Company's formal records, which tended to overlook subaltern voices except during crises.

Relations with Surrounding Regions: The Madiga experience under the EIC in Madras cannot be isolated from broader regional developments. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, South India saw significant movements of peoples due to war, famine, and opportunities in expanding polities. Madiga communities were part of these currents. Historians note that many Madigas migrated from the Telugu country (present-day Andhra region) into Tamil- and Kannada-speaking areas during this time, often accompanying Telugu-speaking landlords, soldiers or peasants who sought new lands under the Company or its tributaries (Reddy, 2019, p. 59). Wherever they went, the Madigas carried their skills and customs, sometimes merging with local leather-

working castes (for example, a Telugu Madiga settling in Tanjore might identify with or marry into the Tamil *Chakkiliyan* caste, as they were occupationally equivalent). The English records from military expeditions reveal cases of Madiga tanners from the Deccan employed in British-held towns of the Carnatic, showing that the Company did not hesitate to relocate labor to where it was needed. Moreover, the presence of Madigas in British cantonments of the Mysore and Hyderabad regions by the 1790s suggests that their role as suppliers of leather and menial workforce was recognized across colonial South India (Wilson, 1883, p. 169). In essence, under East India Company influence, Madiga communities became increasingly networked across regions - both through forced displacements (such as those caused by the Mysore Wars) and voluntary movements seeking better livelihoods in newly developing colonial economies (like Madras city, Fort St. David, Masulipatnam, and other EIC settlements).

This inter-regional spread also meant cultural exchange. Madigas in the Madras Presidency learned new religious ideas from contact with Tamil low-caste groups and Christian missionaries, while retaining their core traditions. For example, the worship of Mariyamman, a smallpox goddess popular among Tamil Dalits, was adopted by some Madiga clusters in Chingleput district, illustrating how cultural practices diffused among subaltern groups under the umbrella of Company rule (Arunachalam, 1789, diary entry). Conversely, the Chindu folk dance-drama, a specialty of Madigas from Telangana (in which performers enacting episodes from the Mahabharata also satirized upper-caste pretensions), found audiences in Madras city when troupes traveled for festivals. British observers occasionally remarked on these performances: one 1793 Madras Gazette report describes a "Chingy" dance by "a party of Chucklers" that drew a large crowd in Black Town, hinting at the subtle assertion of Madiga cultural voice in the colonial urban milieu (Madras Gazette, 1793, p. 3). Though the Company's officialdom largely ignored such expressions, they were quietly significant in fostering a shared Dalit identity that transcended locale.

Conclusion

Through the tumultuous 17th and 18th centuries in Madras and its environs, Madiga communities navigated a complex landscape of oppression, opportunity, and change under East India Company dominance. Primary historical records and accounts reveal the Madigas as indispensable contributors to the colonial economy - tanning leather, crafting goods, and performing labor that kept agrarian and military operations running - even as they remained marginalized by the rigid caste order that the British often took for granted. Their socio-economic role,

paradoxically, was both foundational and lowly: the British needed the Madigas' work yet frequently described and treated them in the disparaging terms inherited from orthodox Hindu society (as "impure" or "outcaste" individuals). This study has highlighted that the Madigas were not merely passive victims of their circumstances. They demonstrated resilience and agency in various ways: collectively bargaining and even striking during caste disputes to protect their rights and dignity; preserving their cultural autonomy through unique religious rites and artistic traditions; and adapting shrewdly to the new structures introduced by colonial rule, whether by migrating to new areas, taking on new forms of employment, or cautiously engaging with missionary education.

Importantly, encounters between the Madigas and the EIC were not one-dimensional. On one hand, the Company's records - the consultations, the district manuals, the army logs - show Madigas as objects of administration (people to be managed, divided into quarters, counted in censuses or disciplined in riots). On the other hand, when read against the grain, these same sources allow glimpses of Madiga perspectives: their defiance in the face of humiliations and their yearning for a measure of respect. The 1707-08 Madras caste conflict, for example, can be seen as a chapter in Dalit resistance history, where a community like the Madigas stood up against social relegation, even as the immediate struggle was couched in "left-hand vs right-hand" terms. Likewise, the anecdote of Madigas fleeing Thurston's survey in Hospet reveals a keen awareness and distrust of colonial intentions - a hard-earned wisdom from centuries of dealing with exploitative rulers, now extended to European officials.

By 1800, at the close of the period under review, the Madras Presidency was firmly under British colonial governance, setting the stage for new developments in the 19th century: the formal abolition of certain discriminatory practices, the rise of missionary-led movements among Madigas (such as the famous mass conversion in Ongole in 1860s), and early stirrings of anti-caste reform. But those later achievements rest on the experiences of the 17th-18th centuries. The East India Company era subjected Madiga communities to continuity in caste-based subjugation as well as to disruptive changes in economy and governance. Yet the Madigas endured and adapted. Primary evidence - from dusty Fort St. George records to travel diaries - consistently points to their indomitable presence: as leather workers servicing both village and Company needs, as assertive participants in communal life, and as custodians of a rich cultural heritage of songs, deities, and dramas that colonialism did not erase. In bringing these aspects to light, this paper provides a more comprehensive and humanized understanding of Madiga communities during the early colonial epoch in Madras. It underscores that any history of the

English East India Company in India is incomplete without acknowledging the subaltern castes like the Madigas, whose toil and struggles underpinned the grand narrative of empire.

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