



Documenting a Social Movement through Cinema:

A First Person Account

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Abstract

This essay is a first-person account of the making of a Telugu documentary film called *Dandora: Resonance of Betrayed Hearts* that was made in 2010. The film documents a political movement that was taking place in the then combined Telugu region, Andhra Pradesh for internal reservation in the overall reservation quota for Dalits. Six years after the film was made, the film-maker who is now an academic teaching in a University, reflects on his first experience of film-making. He recounts elaborately the process of making the film, which gives us an insight into troubles and travails of an independent film-maker. More importantly, he sees his effort of making the documentary film as a part of the political struggle that was taking place at that time, and the role that his film played in documenting that important political movement.

Key words: *documentary film, political movement, internal reservation, documenting political struggle*



Dandora: Resonance of Betrayed Hearts. Documentary directed by Panthukala Srinivas/ English version/ 2010/ 45 min (Graphics Title template designed by Ramesh Cheryala)



Background and Context for *Dandora*, the Documentary Film

Caste is a complex social system in India. On the one hand, it oppresses the untouchables and other backward classes. It communicates its inequality socially, economically, politically and culturally. On the other hand, it also motivates and mobilizes the caste-based and sub-caste based relations in the society. Of all the castes in India, the untouchables constitute the most vulnerable groups who live outside the village. In many villages, they still work as scavengers, beggars, cobblers, storytellers etc. They are barred from entering temples, attending schools, drawing water from wells and participating in public marriages. They do work that is integral for the well-being of the society and yet are subjected to social discrimination, boycott and atrocities. Only about 5% of the untouchable castes benefit from reservations today. Casteism today speaks with a modern voice to exclude the Dalits from education and employment.

Even after 70 years of independence in India, so many communities are out of mainstream society. There is no recognition of the identity and equality of the sub-castes, sub-tribes. Their living condition is extremely vulnerable. Communities that are treated as untouchables *among even the untouchables themselves* are socially, economically, educationally, politically and culturally eliminated from society. Many are migrants going around the cities in search of food and survival. Some are still so ignorant that they do not know that they have the vote as a right; they cannot think about citizenship; they do not know the welfare schemes and social justice because of their untouchability.

The Ambedkar era in Dalit self-assertion, Dalit movement being political assertions of untouchable castes, is historically the background for the Dandora movement, which I will elaborate on later in this essay, and which the documentary film that I made in 2006 attempted to document; it is the experience of making this film that I am re-visiting in this essay. The Mahad movement by the untouchables is a very important historical movement for Dalit struggles as a whole. The landmark documents of this period are the *Lothian Committee Report* (1921), the

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Hutton Report (1921) and Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1939). According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) builds a bridge to enter mainstream society. Even now SCs are untouchable and tribes are eliminated from the society as illiterates or nomadic communities, and do not have access to development. From today's point of view on the one side the upper castes are demanding reservations for economically poor people and criticizing the law of reservations. On the other, among the untouchables there are untouchables who have not accessed basic education, welfare schemes and reservation policy at all.

In Andhra Pradesh my observation is that there are 59 sub-castes among the SCs; 33 sub-tribes among the Scheduled Tribes; and 93 sub-communities in the backward classes. By comparing the benefits of the reservations system I can observe that only one or two sub-castes are getting benefits from reservation quota: for example among SCs Mala and Madiga communities, among the STs Lambada and Yanadi Tribes, and among the BCs Padmashali, Yadav, Munnurukapu and Gouda communities are the main beneficiaries. They get benefits because they form a vote bank.

We find a number of social movements such as in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana by Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS), in Tamil Nadu by Arundhathiyars, in Karnataka Madigas' movement, in Bihar the Maha Dalit movement and in Haryana the Valmiki movements. The demand for categorization of reservations in Andhra Pradesh shows the nature of conflict between Malas and Madigas. Similarly in Haryana and Punjab, the A and B categorization illustrates the Valmiki and Chamar conflict. These conflicts give us an idea about the democratization of Dalit politics and the search for an equal share in constitutional rights. While the government took up the sub-categorization process, the people's movement supporting the sub-categorization process is a cultural one. Madiga Dandora is about the assertion of sub-caste culture among the Dalits. At present all over India Dalit politics have begun to take the form of sub-caste movements and self-respect movements. Studying these movements and representing

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their history in film is an important cultural and civil societal endeavor. Since such studies are non-existent, the film is an important national record of the self-representation of twenty-first century Dalit movements and cultural politics. MRPS was started under the leadership of Manda Krishana Madiga, Krupakar Madiga, Mary Madiga and the philosopher Prof. Muthaiah Madiga in the two Telugu states, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.



MRPS Movement Leaders Manda Krishna, Krupakar, Chitti Babu, Sunkapaka Devaiah, Mary Madiga

Dandora documentary film is a first experience and experiment in my life

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I am a first generation Dalit literate from my slum area Vinayak Nagar, in Nizamabad district of Telangana state. Much struggle has gone into completing my Post-graduate degree in Communications from University of Hyderabad. I have been awarded M. Phil. degree for my dissertation on “*Jatara* as a Mode of Development Communication”. A little over a year ago, I was awarded PhD degree for my dissertation on “Political Economy of Media: The Rise of 24 Hours News Channels in Andhra Pradesh”. At present I am working as Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

When I was pursuing M.A Communication in Hyderabad Central University in 2001, as part of the Course, I wanted to do a documentary film on the Dandora Movement. Actually it was to be a team project, but my proposal was not accepted, and my group did not understand the importance of the documentary. We chose another topic to make a film then. At that time I decided to make an independent documentary when I had the first opportunity. After completing my M.A degree in Communication I immediately got a job in Deccan Development Society, a grassroots NGO that focused on Dalits’ and women’s community media. There I worked as Communications Manager. I learned a lot from the rural, illiterate, Dalit women who operated a community radio and video projects. They have established the Community Media Centre for documenting the unheard voices and are competing with mainstream media. I was inspired, and took this as a challenge to make the independent documentary film on the social movement of MRPS (Madiga Dandora) movement. After two and half years’ experience, I got a job in MAA TV Telugu channel in Hyderabad as a Reporter. Simultaneously I got an M. Phil. seat in Mass Communication and Journalism Department, Hyderabad. I learned reporting skills, improved my communication and began having contacts and an activist circle. I constantly discussed about Dandora and Malamahanadu movements in Andhra Pradesh with my friends in Hyderabad Central University, Osmania University and EFL University (formerly known as CIEFL). They gave me a sharper understanding and shared their intellectual inputs. At that time, I requested one of my friends, Pittala Srisailam for his handycam for making the Dandora documentary. He happily gave his camera and equipment. Whenever Scheduled Castes Reservation and



Categorization programmes came to the forefront in the state, or when the Dandora or Malamahanadu activists started an agitation, I shot live footage for my independent documentary. I had done in-depth research on the issue and collected material from various sources. It took almost five years for coverage of visuals and for understanding the depth of the field.

I was awarded the Sri Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) fellowship at Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in 2005-06, and I decided to work on my documentary script. For making the *Dandora* documentary film, I interacted with activists, academicians, film making professionals and intellectuals using Anveshi's support and contacts. As part of the Short Term Fellowship I completed the script for the Telugu film on Dandora, shot the interviews with various activists and intellectuals and started editing. I taught myself editing techniques and acquired a theoretical perspective. In Anveshi I had discussions with Prof. Susie Tharu, Gogu Shyamala, Jupaka Subhadra and Srivats regarding the Dandora film production. Several times I showed my rough-cut film to my activist friends. The post-production took three months, and finally the film titled *DandoraDaghapadda gunde chappudu* [Dandora The Resonance of the Betrayed Hearts, Telugu version/ 60 min/ 2006] was ready. It was released and screened at Gokak Auditorium, at Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad on 14th April 2006 on the occasion of birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Anveshi provided the academic and intellectual platform where beginners like me could experiment and become professional.

Screenings and Feedback of the first film on Madiga Dandora

The pilot film in Telugu has been screened on three public occasions in Hyderabad at the Hyderabad Central University, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages and Anveshi, Research Centre for Women Studies. It has been screened in Ananthapur district by an independent NGO called Dalit Samkhyā. Similarly, in Kurnool, Nalagonda and Karimnagar

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districts too many intellectuals and activists have screened and watched the film in community halls. In addition, several individuals and groups including one in Jamia Milia Islamia University at Delhi, and in Pondicherry have seen the film in private viewings. G. Sambaiah who is a Dalit Scholar at SOAS, London has also screened the film there as a historic document of this massive people's movement.

I got feedback from Prof. Satyanarayana, Dept. of Cultural Studies, EFL University who had planned to have discussion on this issue at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. The issue of SC Categorization has been spreading across the country and demands have been coming from different states. The students of TISS, however, would not allow him to speak on this issue, at which point he requested for screening of the film *Dandora* on the condition that if they found the film convincing, the discussion on the issue could follow later. Prof. Satyanarayana described that my film on *Dandora* saved the day and convinced the audience to have a discussion on the issue that day!

Dandora has also been screened in National Conference on Movements for Equity in Reservations on 21-22 February 2011, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Prakriti Foundation in association with The Alliance Francaise, Chennai had organized *One Billion Eyes Indian Documentary Film Festival* –on August 15 – 19, 2007, at The Alliance Francaise, Chennai, where again *Dandora* was screened. It has also been screened in the classroom and auditorium for students of the EFL University, Hyderabad. As part of Malcolm Adiseshiah Centenary Celebration, a program titled “Imaging Dalit Reality: Politics of Visual Representation” was organized from 25th - 27th, January 2010, at Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, where *Dandora* was screened again in the Documentary Film Festival-cum-Painting Exhibition. It had raised enough discussion among the people gathered there and raised awareness of the reality of the untouchables among untouchables. In my very first attempt, this film made me as a documentary film maker which gave me an exposure to a number of people and platforms.



STRUCTURE OF THE FILM SCRIPT

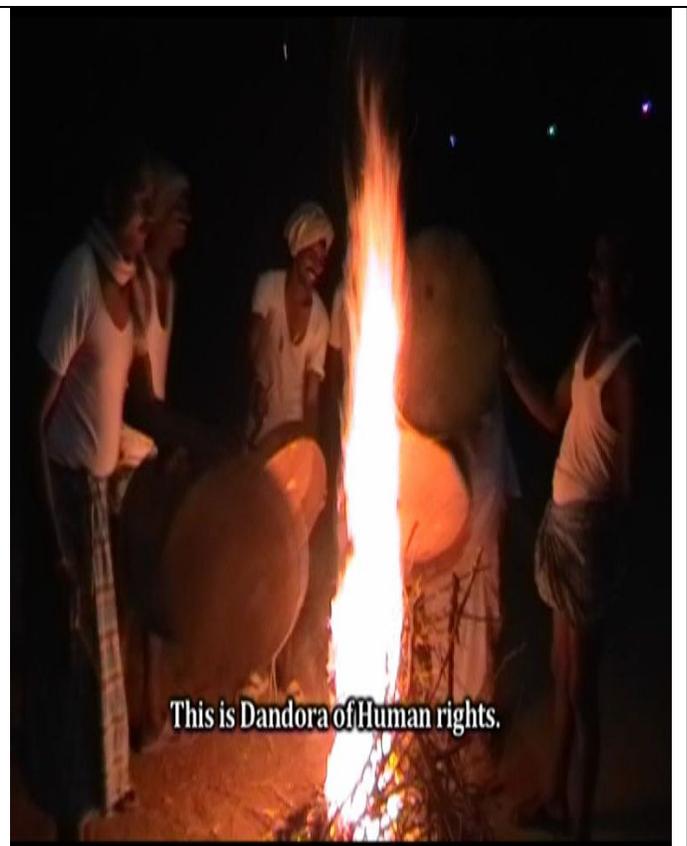


The film starts with a Picture2Camera shot with the background of a Dalit women cobbler who has been working in Osmania university campus under the tree for years. As a film director I gave a brief introduction about the issue in the context of social justice and equality with the woman cobbler under the tree in the backdrop. Earlier Dandora was an instrument of communication in the villages. However, it has now become a movement for social justice countering brahminism and the hierarchical, manuvadi caste system. Dandora is resonating about the disparities existing among the marginalized castes spreading the cause of the self-respect movement of the untouchable castes. This initiative was to generate a debate on the decade old movement for equal share in the resources and quotas in the reservations in Andhra Pradesh.



Sequence 1: Dappu Culture and Song as Communication

Dappu Culture is introduced with a song by Daruvu Yellanna a powerful singer-composer of Madiga culture. Dappu is the traditional percussion instrument for social communication. It is a model for social development and communication. It is a symbol of subaltern identity. I have used this song in the film intermittently to build tempo, continuity and for narrative purposes.





Song1: *I, who created sound in the serene sky,
has pioneered the production process for centuries,
renowned as the ruler of the Jambu Dweepam,
I am the Madiga, the native of this land
the pioneering ruler of this country*

Sequence 2: Social Structure and Village Culture



Here I showed how the caste system creates social hierarchy and the social ladder system and structure in all villages. I indicated how it is also practiced among Dalit communities and sub-castes. The village itself is divided based on caste. We can easily identify the Dalitwada. In recent times, each and every village has established a statue of Ambedkar to show their struggle for identity and self assertion.

Sequence 3: Dalits and Traditional Occupations

This sequence is about caste-based occupation and the discrimination based on it. In rural India still traditional occupations are based on caste and sub-caste. I have documented the lives of manual scavengers, cobblers, beggars, etc. I had completed that part of my shooting when I came to know about women's participation in the MRPS movement under the leadership of Mary Madiga. Anveshi as a women's organization sensitized me regarding this, and I documented the participation and leadership of Mary Madiga.

Song Sung by Mary Madiga, MRPS activist

Launch or spread the Dandora,

Dandora of Madiga brothers, Madiga sisters, Madiga mothers;

Spread the Dandora, Dandora of ABCDs;

Dandora of the lagging behind;

Dandora of the bonded, of the starving, of the cloth less,

Dandora of Mastins, of Dakkalis,

of Chindus, of Budga Jangams, Paakis, Bindlas, Gosangi communities;

Malas are our own people,

They are not our enemies but are labourers;

Give us our share and give their share to them.



This song sung by Mary Madiga during the MRPS movement narrated the conditions under which different castes and sub-castes are found. This song was disseminated widely by MRPS, and it communicated effectively and mobilized thousands of marginalized communities for raising their voice towards self-respect and equal share. Before this movements most people hardly knew the list of castes among the SCs. The documentary gave a sense of the existing complex social realities.



Sequence 4: Dalit Movements and Sub-Caste Identity

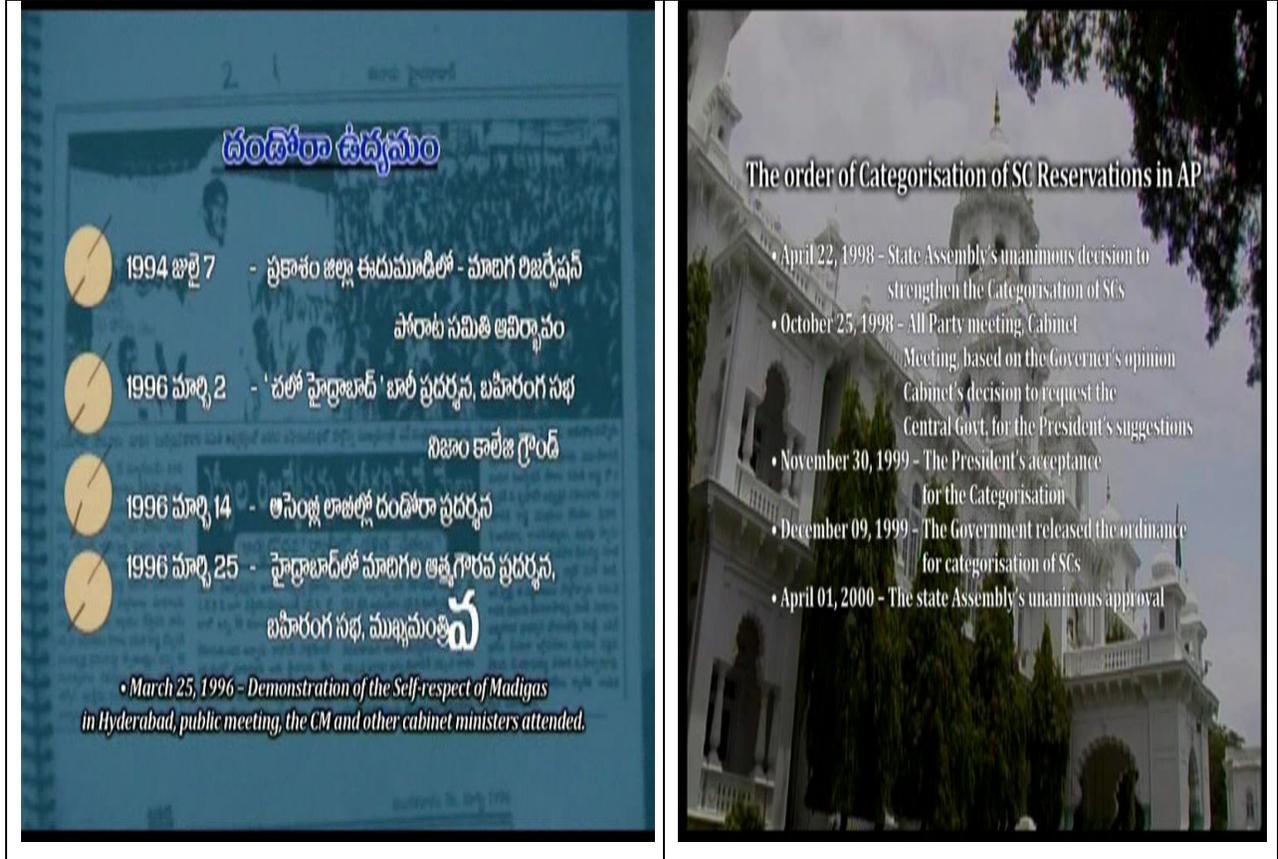
During the last two decades, Dalits are fighting for their rights and arguing for an equal share in reservation quota for sub-castes in the Scheduled Caste list. In the course of filming for the documentary I have actively done participant observation of the Andhra Pradesh Dandora Movement which has mobilized for reservation, for providing equal share and equal opportunity



for all the Dalit communities. It is found that reservation system itself is not implemented properly and so many sub-caste communities are not getting benefits of reservation. Dandora is reverberating for equal share of economic, social, political, educational and occupational rights.

Song sung by Daruvu Yellanna

*Let's have the beat – the beat of the drummers,
This is the beat of the drummers – the beat of the band;
at the land-lords daughter's wedding – Kanakanna plays the dappu;
after the wedding – he gave us a morsel on the trash heap;
seeing the scene – the dappu's chest throbs with agony
the aged mother of an upper caste – died of aging;
the dappu bore the coffin and laid the pyre;
though ostracised, the dappu shed tears at the dead;
the dappu performs weddings – as well as wars;
they beat both at the weddings and at the deaths*

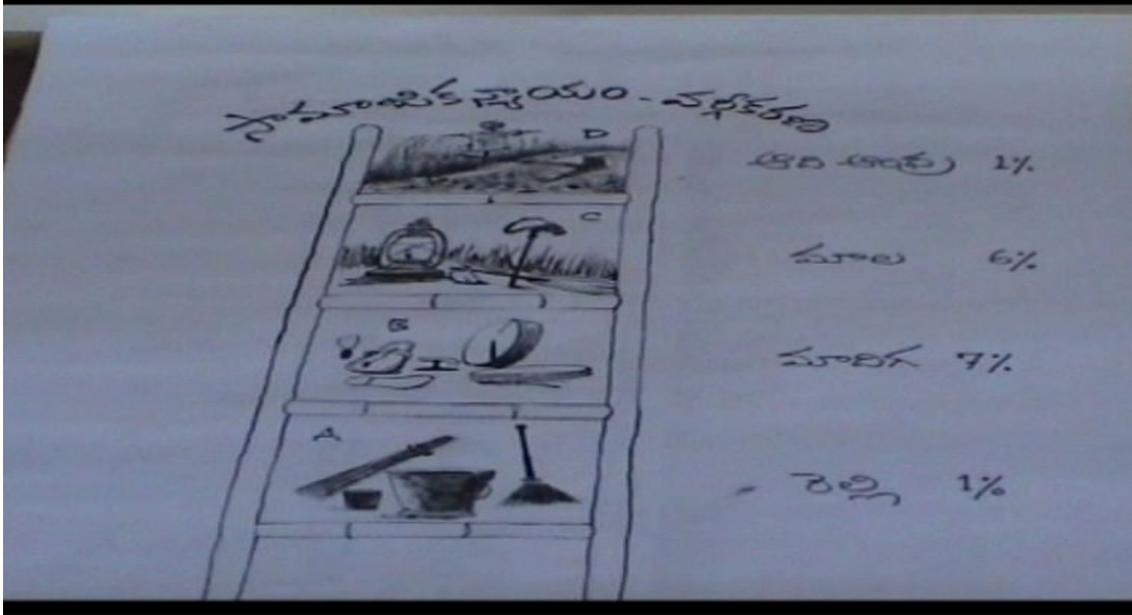


Sequence 5: In this sequence I focused on the arguments put forth by MRPS and Malamahanadu movements in Andhra Pradesh for unity, identity and self-respect, and how they attempt to provide an understanding of the reservation categorization issue. In 1981 the Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission categorized the SC reservations into ABCD based on the demographic statistics of the Scheduled Castes and the relationship of the sub-castes to the major castes. The Commission designated 1% to Group A, comprising Relli sub-castes, 7% to Group B, comprising Madiga sub-castes, 6% to the Group C, comprising Mala sub-castes and 1% to the Group D, comprising Adhi Andhra sub-castes and implemented the reservations.

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Categorization SC Reservation into A: 1%, B: 6%, C: 7%, D: 1% in 2000, AP.

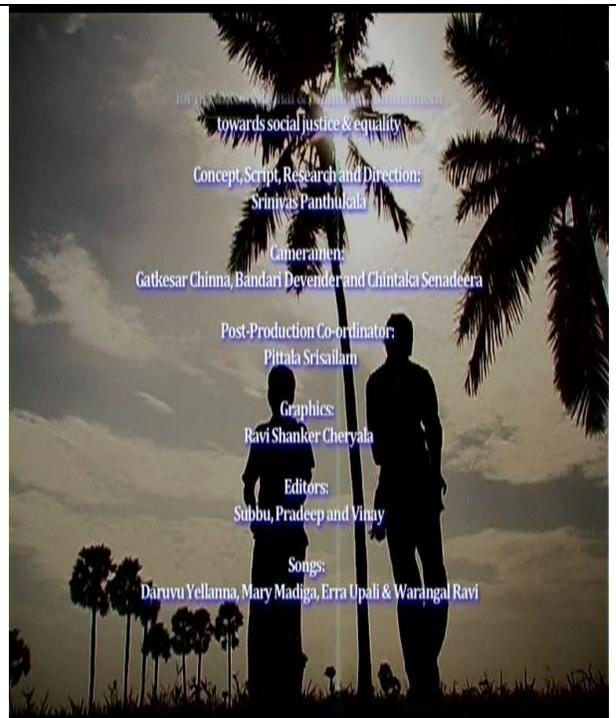
The Reservation Categorization Act was implemented from 2000 to November 5, 2004. The Madiga and Relli sub-castes that had been backward for the past 50 years have progressed in the education and employment sectors because of the Categorization Act during the last few years.

Dandora, the documentary ends by posing questions to the audience to propel them to take the right decision and show their solidarity towards social justice and equality. The film ends with Picture2Camera shot of the historic Arts college, Osmania University and in the background is the sound of the Gootam Debba (The punching sound of cobbler's instruments). As a self-respect movement, would the Madiga Dandora Movement achieve the ideals of Ambedkar? Would the Mala Mahanadu be introspective now? Would social justice apply to all the sub-castes listed in the SC category? Would the regional disparities among the Dalits be abolished? Would our parliamentary democracy consider the issue of classification as an issue of social justice? Would the Parliament amend the Constitution to legalise the classification? These are a million questions before us. Now the ball is in the court of Parliament. Let's wait for social justice. No one knows how long the wait is...

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Documentary Film Production Experience:

Documentary Practice is the complex process of creating documentary projects. It refers to what people do with media devices, content, form, and production strategies in order to address the creative, ethical, and conceptual problems and choices that arise as they make documentaries. It has three stages of the production: 1) Pre-production: Idea, Conceptual frame work, script, survey of the field, in-depth research on the issue; 2) Production: team of the production, contacts, communication tools, accommodation, transportation and hiring equipment; and 3) Post-Production: Video/Film editing and audio composition and burning on DVD/CD format and screening and discussions.

Pre-Production: *Dandora* the documentary film took almost five years to be made. It started from an idea of social justice and began documenting the self-respect movement of MRPS and understanding its theoretical and conceptual framework for visualizing the film. Research for making documentary films to show the comparative data and statistics related to different castes took a lot of time, as also theoretically analysing the issue from the perspective of social justice. I planned to take footage whenever the movement activities took place; I planned interviews with many activists in the course of these movements. It was a challenge to capture live action on the field during these movements. It meant that I had to be fully prepared with Cameraman and Camera, and had to be ready to direct him about the shots, sequences and sound bytes which needed to be recorded. With all this preparation, I recorded more than 25 hours of footage in five years. I also had to make elaborate plans for the songs and music in the documentary. I had discussions with many intellectuals and activists to have a better understanding of the social movement.

Production: It took one year for interviewing the movement's leaders Manda Krishna Madiga and Krupakar Madiga, Gaddar, Mary Madiga and philosopher Prof. Muthaiah. While they were doing very well organizing and mobilising for the movement on the field, they could hardly understand the importance of the medium of cinema, which is a powerful and effective mode of

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communication. Mainstream media did not focus much on the issue; it only offered lip sympathy. This documentary became a live space for documenting the history of the Dandora movement in the context of Digital era. It was made by Handy cam and semi-professional cameras but it has recorded the historical movements and put them alive in the digital mode. Sometimes the leaders of the movements cannot speak other than vernacular language; the English version has ensured that the movements' objectives reached the global platforms and generated huge discussion.

Post-Production: The Film's Title was designed by Cheryala Ramesh who was the Graphics Editor of Gemini TV without financial remuneration. It took three months period for completing the film editing work. I had a good professional friend Subramanyam who has hands on experience in film editing and who also has an editing suite at home. We use to start our editing work late in the evening every day after dinner and would go on till 5 a.m. the next morning. He too volunteered his services for the documentary and hardly charged anything for the editing. Since I was working in the field of TV Journalism, I could get support from Cameramen, Video Editors and Technician for successfully completing the Dandora Project. Sareen Chatla, who is now my colleague in the EFL University transcribed the script, prepared the subtitles and gave voice for the film. This took almost 2 years.

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Bionote:

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