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Love in the time of caste The Hindu



• Thilakam and Kathir



• The Hindu

Daring to be different: Film actor M.G. Ramachandran (left) presides over an inter-caste marriage held in Madras on June 28, 1970, held under the aegis of N.V. Natarajan, Minister for Backward Classes. Photo: The Hindu Archives



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Saroja and Ranganathan, an inter caste couple. Photo: K. Pichumani



Iraivi and Nainar

Even as Tamil Nadu reacts violently to inter-caste marriages, LAKSHMI KRUPA finds three couples who dared to break the unwritten law

KATHIR & TILAKAM, 1999

Dalit and Thevar

Kathir and Tilakam fell in love when they were working together in an NGO in Madurai, and got married under the Special Marriages Act. "We have been married for 12 years now and we couldn't be happier," says Kathir. They faced pressure from all around, family and community, but Tilakam's father was Leftist and together the family was able to overcome the ire of the caste groups. Kathir says that his wife refuses to use her caste name because it makes her shameful. Kathir does, though, as a way to reclaim his identity. "Generally, Dalits have a complex and tend to hide. Why should they? If someone says I am untouchable, the one who says it should hide in shame. Not me. Everyone knew who I was when I married my wife. I wanted them to know."

SAROJA & RANGATHAN, 1990

Brahmin and Dalit

She is a Tamil Brahmin from Erode, brought up in an agraharam (Brahmin colony). He is a Scheduled Caste man. "My family wanted me to wait because I had sisters but I would not," she recalls, because his parents had already started to look for a girl. "I was deeply disenchanted with my caste," remembers Saroja. "My Muslim friends would steal me into their homes and offer me their food." The couple faced a lot of trouble initially from caste groups, family and neighbours. Eventually everyone came around. "It's been 30 years now. I couldn't be happier," says Saroja. "I couldn't change my birth, but I could get out of this system by marrying him."

IRAIVI & NAINAR, 1981

BC and Pazhankudiyinar

Iraivi's father was a follower of Periyar who advocated the rejection of caste names, and marriage outside caste groups. Way back in 1958, he had a *Jaadi Maruppu* or caste-rejecting marriage, and insisted that his children do the same. Iraivi went one step further. "I requested my father to find me a man not just from a BC or MBC community but a Pazhankudiyinar (tribal) man." She married Nainar in a self-respect ceremony. "We have had a very happy married life," says Iraivi, who has now taken on the mantle of arranging inter-caste marriages between Dalits and other castes. "It serves the purpose of caste groups to make it seem like inter-caste marriages won't work in Tamil Nadu. From my own experience, I can say they surely do."

In 1967, Tamil Nadu chief minister C.N. Annadurai created history by amending the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. To this day, it's the only state in India that recognises what's called a 'self-respect' marriage (*suyamariyaathai* or *seethiruththa* marriage) rejecting priests and dowry and encouraging inter-caste matrimony. Garlands, mangalsutras, even rings are optional. Tamil leader Periyar called this "daring not just for Tamil Nadu but also the entire world".

Which is why the controversy and violence over Vanniyar girl Divya's marriage with Dalit boy Ilavarasan, leading to the boy's ultimate death, has been such a rude awakening to many who assumed that Tamil Nadu had made significant strides in dealing with caste inequity. The ground reality, very far from the reform rhetoric, is that marriages between upper-caste women and Dalit men are an exception rather than the rule.

The Vanniyar caste to which Divya belongs is classified as a Most Backward Caste while Ilavarasan as a Dalit falls right outside the pale. Today, it is at this end of the spectrum of the rainbow of caste politics that the most heated debate and violence is taking place.

Vanniyar girl Senthamizhselvi and her Dalit husband Vimalraj are in hiding. “After Ilavarasan’s death I fear for our lives,” she says over the phone, talking from an undisclosed location. In Senthamizhselvi’s village Manakkarai there have been in all only three ‘love’ marriages. “The first two were within our caste, but they created a huge uproar,” she says, and they were not considering marriage. Says Vimalraj, “She was studying and I wanted to wait till she finished.” However, a man belonging to Senthamizhselvi’s community, already married, who ran the canteen in her college fell in love with her. He offered her parents financial help and convinced them to marry her to him. He also told them of her affair with a Dalit boy. That’s when the two decided to elope. They first tried to register their marriage in a neighbouring village but weren’t allowed to do so. They were finally married by advocate K.S. Karthikeyan and registered their marriage in Thirupandal.

This, then, is the reality in Tamil Nadu’s villages where caste groups continue to rule. The fact that this degree of violence is not seen when an upper caste man marries a lower caste woman shows that the caste politics at play are very much the politics of gender and masculinity. The voice of the woman, whether Dalit or Vanniyar, does not figure. They become the ‘trophies’, the symbols that the males of each caste use to prove status and power. A. Kathir runs Evidence, a Madurai-based NGO that works with Dalit issues. He is a Dalit man married to an upper caste woman. “If an upper caste man marries a lower caste or Dalit woman, he is considered ‘benevolent’; he has ‘uplifted’ her. It is his heir that she will bear. But when an upper caste woman marries a Dalit man, she bears a lower-caste heir and caste fanatics will not allow their caste being made ‘impure’,” he says. In Vedaranyam in May last year, a Vanniyar woman was lynched for having an affair with a Dalit man. Before she died, the men from her caste reportedly asked her if Vanniyar men could not make her happy.

The role of caste-based political parties has been that of guardians of their caste’s masculine honour, and the onus of maintaining that honour continues to fall on the woman. Unfortunately, as Kathir points out, while several other states have been asked to furnish reports on instances of honour killing, Tamil Nadu has not figured on the list because it is not called honour killing here. Says U. Vasuki, Tamil Nadu State General Secretary of AIDWA (All India Democratic Women’s Association) “When a father kills his daughter and her husband for a ‘love marriage’ it is registered as murder by the police. When we go on field visits to Theni or Sivaganagai, we find a lot of ‘missing’ women. The parents don’t follow up and the police are more than happy to say she must have eloped with someone. What our country needs is a separate legislation for honour killing like we have for Sati.”

Within each caste, upper or lower, women are considered inferior. “However, since she is the main instrument carrying caste purity into the next generation, she is forced to marry a man from her caste. This is how caste groups keep women’s sexuality under control,” says Vasuki. “Ramadoss has said that Dalit men touching Vanniyar women will have their hands cut off. AIDWA’s question to him is what they will do if a Vanniyar man touches a woman without her permission?”

Caste groups sustain power on their ability to control the men of subordinate castes, which rides on their ability to control women in public and private spheres. As Iraivi says, “They threaten violence to anybody who dares to challenge this. It’s for the government to offer protection to these families.”

