

# Love Meets Death: “Honour,” Violence, and Inter-caste Marriages in Tamil Nadu

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## Introduction

The decapitated body of a young man was found on a railway track near Pallipalayam village in Namakkal district, Tamil Nadu on June 24, 2015. The young man was identified as Gokulraj, a twenty-two-year-old engineering graduate from a Dalit caste (Paraiyar) from nearby Omalur in Salem district. Though it was initially speculated that he might have been run over by a train, post-mortem reports revealed that he had suffered multiple injuries prior to his death. The circumstances leading to this murder eventually became public. As the media reported it, Yuvaraj, the founder of Dheeran Chinnamalai Peravai, an outfit serving the “interests” of the Kongu Vellala Kavundar (hereafter, I will refer to it as Kavundar) caste, was allegedly involved in the murder.<sup>1</sup> Yuvaraj and his accomplices, who belong to the caste outfit, are said to have abducted Gokulraj from the famous Siva-Ardhanariswarar temple, located at the top of a hillock in Tiruchengode, when they saw him along with his lover (*kātali*), a girl named Swathi of the Kavundar caste. The abduction was recorded by the temple’s CCTV camera and was subsequently listed as police evidence against the perpetrators. According to the police, the group took Gokulraj to a secluded place, murdered him, and dumped him on the railway track.

The violence Dalit men face when they become romantically involved with or marry non-Dalit women from members of dominant caste groups is not entirely new to Tamil Nadu. Two years before Gokulraj was murdered, in July 2013, the mutilated body of Ilavarasan, who belonged to

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the same Dalit caste as Gokulraj, was found near a railway track in Dharmapuri district in northern Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup> Recently, in March 2016, Sankar, a twenty-two-year-old Dalit (Pallar) man, was stabbed and killed in broad daylight by paid killers at a road junction in Udumalpet town. His ‘mistake’ was his marriage to college-mate Kausalya, who is from the Piramalai Kallar (Thevar) caste, eight months before the incident.<sup>3</sup>

According to a news report (*The Times of India*, March 16, 2016), which cites Mr. A. Kathir, Executive Director of Evidence—a Madurai-based non-governmental organization doing phenomenal work in support of Dalits—eighty-one “honour killings” had taken place in Tamil Nadu between July 2013 and March 2016.<sup>4</sup> Of these killings, “eighty per cent of the victims are female,” and shockingly “not a single killer has been brought to book” so far. Mr. Kathir notes that “usually the murders are committed only when the groom is a Dalit; when the bride is a Dalit, they usually separate the couple and warn the girl not to have any contact with the man in the future.” The report also observes that murders of non-Dalit women who were married to Dalit men are arranged by the murderers in such a way that “they look like suicides.” Sasikala, Vaidehi, and Bhavani of Ramanathapuram district in southeastern Tamil Nadu were some of the women killed by their own family members in the years 2013 and 2014 as per the news report.

Against this backdrop of the violence faced by Dalit men and their non-Dalit women partners from dominant caste group members, I intend to explore the sociocultural discourses on “honour” and the opposition to inter-caste marriage/love that frame this violence. I draw upon a disparate set of resources, which range from face-to-face and phone conversations, mythological narratives, and media representations to social-media posts, online newspapers and magazines, and social-networking sites. I mostly focus on the Kavundar community, and often draw upon the murder of Gokulraj. I was in Chennai, Tamil Nadu when it happened, and found myself amidst a flurry of unsettling information from friends. Along with my friends Devibharathi and Kavitha Muralidharan, I traveled to Gokulraj’s native town, Omalur, and to Tiruchengode, Erode and Vellakoyil in the Kongu region, where we interacted with several local residents and journalists. Devibharathi is well-known in Tamil Nadu not only for his fiction, but for his essays critiquing casteist practices against marginalized caste groups, including “service castes” and Dalits; Kavitha is a journalist who has published articles on Dalit issues and politics. Both

were interested in visiting Gokulraj's home and in comprehending the background of his death. After returning to Chennai, I also made contact with some people who are originally from the Kongu region but living elsewhere at present. I continued interacting with them over the phone, and through emails and social-media platforms.

When I started to work on this essay, I felt the need to interrogate my own socio-cultural location and the predicaments that they have engendered in me. I was born and raised in a Brahmin family, and have thereby accrued certain "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1984) since Brahmins occupy the topmost level of the caste hierarchy. At the same time, being considered as a "woman" in inter-subjective encounters both within and outside my family, I have had experiences from time to time that strongly underscore my "secondary" gender status. Further, this writing is produced and reviewed within academic institutional settings, and hence, it is endowed with a certain degree of academic authority as well. I also write in Tamil newspapers and magazines, and recently I have published a couple of essays on "honour killing" in Tamil.<sup>5</sup> While I teach in a liberal arts college in the United States, I am very much part of the Tamil intellectual milieu, where discussions on this subject take place regularly in social media and at informal gatherings. Taking into account these complexities that frame my sociocultural location, what I try to do in this essay is "practically theorize" the discourses of violence in these casteist killings, while understanding that such "theorizing" as a politicized practice operates at a different register than that of the direct political struggles. In this, I go along with Moussa and Scapp (1996:89), who, interpreting and falling in line with Foucault, observe that the "practical theorizing" only intends to "clear a space" in which the oppressed themselves can launch a "counter-discourse" in the form of a "practical engagement in political struggles."

In other words, in this essay, as I try to destabilize certain hegemonic caste-centered discourses centered on "honour," I do not claim to speak on behalf of those who suffer caste-related discrimination and violence. As I engage in clearing some space for counter-discourses of resistance, I also acknowledge that an academic enterprise cannot be a substitute for a political project of resistance, which, I think, should be primarily shaped and its course determined by those oppressed by caste practices. In fact, struggles of resistance have been organized by non-governmental orga-

nizations like Evidence and affected women themselves. For instance, Kausalya, who survived the attack that killed her husband, is now actively involved in forging a community of people against caste-related murders. Along with Abirami, another young woman from Kallar caste, who also lost her Dalit husband to casteist rage, she has joined hands with women's organizations and non-governmental organizations, such as All India Democratic Women's Association and Evidence to mobilize the victims of "honour-killings" and raise awareness.<sup>6</sup>

### **Terminologies: A Brief Review**

It is worth-mentioning that the problems of the usage "honour killing" with its culture-specific underpinnings have been widely debated from heterogeneous perspectives. While I cannot do justice to the entire range of these debates within the scope of this essay, I will draw attention to some of these perspectives. First, scholars have pointed out that the usage "honour killing" essentializes certain cultures and communities marked by this specific form of violence, portraying them as non-modern or inadequately modern (Chakravarti 2005; Abu-Lughod 2013). As Uma Chakravarti (2005:309) observes, in "popular parlance" among "international locations," the phrase gets "associated with the 'uniqueness' of Asian cultures, with irrational communities, and aberrant and archaic patriarchal practices refusing to modernize." According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2013:114), it emerges from a worldview in which "culture itself, or 'tradition', is taken to be the cause of the criminal violence" and, thus, "stigmatizes not particular acts of violence but entire cultures and communities."<sup>7</sup> For Inderpal Grewal (2014:165), the term "honour killing" informs a "geopolitics of colonialism and race in which some cultures are understood solely through patriarchy while others are seen to have outgrown it." Further, it is bolstered in academic discussions and research studies in social sciences including anthropology, and has a viable currency in "multiple media, scholarly, and NGO circuits" (Grewal 2014:164).

Secondly, not only does "honour killing," based on an essentialized notion of culture, posit and reify a "superior," democratic, liberal "West" as against an "inferior," hierarchical, "East," it also gets entrenched in other similar dichotomous grids, such as "village"/"city" and "rural"/

“urban-global,” which are likewise associated with “traditionalism”/ “modernity” and “backwardness”/“progressiveness,” respectively (Abu-Lughod 2013; Grewal 2014). As pointed out by Grewal (2014:179), in print media reports on “honour killings” rural women, as compared to urban women, are represented as “more constrained,” as if the village locus embodies an unchanging cultural essence in terms of patriarchy. “Honour killing” is thus deployed strategically to “outsource patriarchy” to the “rural” by the metropolitan cities (Grewal 2014).

Thirdly, not only does “honour” suffer a loss of appropriate contextual meaning in translation (Gill 2014:1–2), “honour killing” also tends to gloss over a multitude of dynamics underlying the violence, as literature on this violence has consistently pointed out. The “excuse of honour” is used to cover heterogeneous reasons, such as “land disputes and old enmities,” that lead to the murder (Shah-Davis 2011:191). Prem Chowdhry (2007) has demonstrated that male-centered economic interests, including the right to inheritance, could be an important reason contributing to this violence in the Jat community in Haryana. Moreover, violence perpetrated under variegated circumstances can get loosely identified with “honour killing.” The term “honour,” Grewal (2014:177) argues, can subsume diverse “factors,” including “property, sexual control, the crisis of masculinity, the rise in elopement, the emergence of individuality, and of “choice” in marriage, class interests that may clash with caste interests, globalization, increased media coverage, and NGO interest,” as well as disparate issues of “the struggles around quotas for Dalits and OBCs, rising property costs, the crisis in agriculture, and the emergence of new jobs for women” in its fold.

While I agree that all such heterogeneous sociocultural and economic dynamics can be rallied under “honour,” these critical insights are not adequate to understand the contemporary currency the usages “honour” (*kauravam*) and “honour killing” (*kauravak kolai*) have among the dominant caste group members in Tamil Nadu.<sup>8</sup> As for “honour killing,” this usage, referring to murder in the context of inter-caste marriage or inter-caste love, is recent and it has been popularized only in last ten years in India with the work of non-governmental organizations, especially Evidence.<sup>9</sup> However, this usage seems to have been adopted by (internalized by?) the Kavundar caste group. For instance, Pongalur Manikandan, the state leader of the Kongu Velalakkavundarkal Peravai, gave a statement on

April 1, 2014 criticizing the murder of Vaidehi, a twenty-one-year-old pregnant woman, by her own family for marrying a Dalit man. In the statement, he expressed that “in his experience he has never seen such a sinful act and honour killing (*kauravak kolai*) in the Kongu region.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the aftermath of Gokulraj’s murder, in a pleading letter (June 29, 2015) to the “leaders of the Kongu community,” an association called Kongu Vellalak Kavundarkal Panpattu Patukappu Maiyam asked: “A Dalit student dies under suspicious circumstances. ... Even the concerned girl student has given a statement to the police that they were just friends and were not in love. ...When things are like that, and when we, Kongu Vellalars, have been charged with honour killing (*kauravak kolai*) why are you leaders silent? ... Can’t you at least issue a statement?”<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, in my conversations with members of the Kavundar caste group in the Kongu region, I did not hear them employing the phrase “honour killing,” but they often invoked “honour” when we discussed marriage or love (which in such discourse, importantly, are always heterosexual), and the killing of Gokulraj. While “honour” was articulated by them as an inherent, essential trait or attribute of the Kavundar caste group, I will argue that this usage in the context of discussions on marriage actually functions as a discursive strategy to legitimate mandatory kinship practices that regulate female sexuality within a “compulsory heterosexual” matrix through clan exogamy and caste endogamy.<sup>12</sup> Through clan exogamy that allows for “exchange of women” between patrilineal clans, and through caste endogamy, which sets a “limit” (Butler 2004) to this exchange, the so-called “culture” of the Kavundar caste is perpetually reproduced and reiterated.<sup>13</sup> However, the enactment of kinship practices do not remain unchallenged, and they are occasionally disrupted by alternate practices in the forms of inter-caste marriage and inter-caste love. Particularly when Kavundar women and Dalit men are involved, acts of violence, including killing, threatening, assaulting and forceful separation of the couple, are perpetrated by members of the caste group to set right such disruption.

The kinship practices of marriage are not merely reinforced through acts of physical violence. Often the family members and the larger caste group engage in discursive mediation of inter-caste marriage and love, especially involving Dalit men, in private and public spaces, including domestic spaces, political meetings and caste group gatherings. As I will show, in such discursive mediation, framed by “honour” among other

similarly assumed moral attributes of the caste group, Dalit subject positions are stereotypically and negatively constructed, underscoring a regressive interventionist agenda to thwart any possible attempt by the women of Kavundar caste group to cross over the “limit” of caste endogamy.

### **Conversations: “Honour,” Love, and “Love Drama”**

It was an afternoon in the month of July 2014, and Kavitha, Devibharathi, and I were exploring a plan to visit Omalur to meet Gokulraj’s family. All of us were feeling perturbed by Gokulraj’s murder. A video was making its rounds on Whatsapp and social-media websites, in which Gokulraj said he was committing suicide after his love failure. In the video, Gokulraj addressed his brother “*tambi*” (‘younger brother’), while he had only an *aṇṇa* (‘elder brother’), and hence it was thought that he was forced by his kidnappers to record it.

I was just introduced to M., who recently got married to a close friend of mine. M. belongs to a “service community” of barbers, categorized as a most backward community in Tamil Nadu, and has been living in Vellakkoil (near Erode) for more than three decades. I could immediately strike a rapport with her, and she eventually became my friend. M. told us attacks on Dalit young men who were “looking at” Kavundar girls are nothing new in that area. By “that area,” she referred not only to towns like Vellakkoil which are located near Erode, but also to the larger Kongu region.<sup>14</sup> A Dalit youth, she said, was attacked the previous day in Vellakkoil because he used to stand “regularly” [sic] near a house of Kavundars to “look at” a (Kavundar) girl. “Yesterday four men came and beat him up. I saw that and nobody went and rescued him.” I could feel her sorrow when she continued: “He must be twenty-one or twenty-two-years-old. Very bad.” I asked her: “You couldn’t go near them (and stop the beating)?” “Impossible (*muṭiyātu*). It is difficult (*kaṣṭam*).” This response, as frustrating as it appears, was perhaps informed by her life-experience. M. shared a terrible incident from her past with us:

M: My sister K. committed suicide nine years back. She was in love with a Kavundar man. She was twenty-five and he was thirty-five. He promised to marry her but eventually refused. She hung herself. After

this, the man became mentally affected for a year. He would come to our house asking for K.'s sari. He gifted her a sari, and after her death he told us that he saw her wearing that sari waiting for him on the roadside. He recovered from his mental illness. In fact, he even became a councilor at the local *panchayat*. One night he was returning in his car, after watching a cock-fight in a nearby village. He was found dead in the car. No one knows how he died. Some say he had a heart attack. No post-mortem was done.

Perundevi Srinivasan (PS): Why did he refuse to marry K.?

M: Caste, what else?

At that point, our cab driver B. joined our conversation and started talking about the death of a girl named Nandini in Sivagiri near Erode in January 2013. Nandini was a student of an engineering college in Coimbatore and her body was found in a charred state in Sivagiri on a Monday morning. B. told us that the girl was in love with a Vanniyar man, called Kabilan, from the same town. She was murdered and her burnt body was thrown in the vicinity of her lover's house in a ploy to implicate him in her death. However, a charred mobile phone which belonged to her family member was recovered near the body. "When a Kavundar girl loves a man from a caste which is below hers, it would only end like this," added B. (Later, however, I learnt from the news reports that, after police investigations, Kabilan was arrested for abetting her suicide.<sup>15</sup>)

As B. was describing Nandini's murder, Devibharathi explicated a few things about the inter-caste dynamics between Kavundars and Vanniyars in the realm of inter-caste marriage and love in the region. It is well-known that members of Vanniyar caste also engage in violence against Dalit men and Vanniyar women when they intermarry, as was evident in the case of the killing of Ilavarasan in Dharmapuri. However, when Vanniyar men marry or fall in love with Kavundar women, they could be at the receiving end of retribution from Kavundar caste group.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Devibharathi pointed out, if it were a Dalit man, the retribution might take the form of heinous torture and murder, as in the case of Gokulraj. M. joined him and said: "Usually the caste rules are strictly observed when Dalits are in the scene."

Not just Gokulraj, but Ilavarasan, Sankar and countless other Dalit men have faced similar brutal retribution from members of several dominant caste groups. Violence against Dalit men mostly assumes the form of a

public spectacle. Their mutilated bodies are thrown near railway tracks or they are killed in broad daylight at a crowded place. Pictures of the killed Dalits are widely circulated by dominant caste members on social media as well. One such picture, circulated under the name of “Senthurappottu Kavundar” in the month of March 2016 on Facebook, displays photographs of the bodies of Ilavarasan and Gokulraj, and of the assault on Sankar, with a meme “If you engage in inter-caste marriage, this is the consequence” (*kalapput tirumaṇam purintāl, itu tān kati*).<sup>17</sup> The instrumental usage of violence-as-spectacle in the service of dominant caste hegemony and power needs an in-depth exploration. What does this violence attempt to enact? Is this enactment all about motivating terror or is it about staging a differential hierarchy of masculinities among caste groups? How does the enactment constitute Dalit men as certain types of subjects, and who are its intended audiences? These questions need to be researched on their own, and, perhaps, this will be among my future tasks.

As we were traveling to Vellakoil, M. put me in touch with A. N., a middle-aged Kavundar man in Vellakkoil near Erode and M.’s colleague. A. N. had already told her of his wish to speak with me. At the outset, A. N. expressed that he is against “inter-caste marriage,” and he has his “reasons” (*kāraṇam*) for his opposition. I am giving an excerpt from our conversation.

AN: I am not for all these inter-caste marriages. I don’t think they would work (*sari varatu*). Time and again, they try to do this. Gokulraj’s death should not have taken place. But inter-caste marriages do not suit us.

PS: By “us,” you mean ...

AN: Kavundars. We. It won’t work.

PS: Why do you say that?

AN: Because honour is embedded in our genes (*eṅka gene-leyē kauravam irukku*). How can we leave it? How can we have marital relationship with them [Dalits]? They used to call us like *araṇmanai* (‘palace’), *esamāṅka* (‘master’) and *rājāṅka* (‘king’). How can we put up with them taking (*kuṭṭiṭṭup pōratai*) our women away?

PS: But the times are changing.

AN: Maybe. It does not mean we should give up our caste.

As soon as I finished the call, I asked M. about her thoughts on “honour.” She quickly retorted: “What is honour (*kauravam*), after all? It is just caste honour (*jāti kauravam*).” M. also told me how Kavundars are addressed by “service” castes and Dalits in and around Erode.

M: What A. N. said is true. We call them “master.” We call their house “palace.” If we visit a Kavundar’s household to see a newborn ... imagine, it’s just born. We call it “*cinna esamān*” (‘little master’) or “*cinna atta*” (‘little mother’) or “*cinna kavundacci*” (‘little Kavundar woman’).

PS: You can’t use its name or if it doesn’t have a name, can’t you call it “baby”?

M: No, never. Nobody would do it here. We are expected to use these terms of address. But even an old man from our castes, even if he is 60 or 70 ... a Kavundar child can use “*vāṭā pōṭā*” with him [i.e., can use a singular imperative mood—*vāṭā* (‘come’), *pō* (‘go’)—and disrespectful, masculine address term—*ṭā*].

Others I spoke with occasionally employed the term “honour” and when I asked them they explicated it. For instance, V., a male journalist in Tiruchengode, said: “Honour means lifestyle and economics. It is the way of living given to us by our ancestors. The way of living that comes through generations.” But as soon as he finished uttering this, a local AIADMK party leader and councilor who was present intervened with more frank remarks on inter-caste marriage: “Why did they divide us into this and that caste? We raise our daughters. Don’t we know how to marry them off?” V. and this local leader belong to the Kavundar caste. I asked V.:

You just mentioned lifestyle and economics. You know very well that Gokulraj was an engineering graduate. He had tremendous job opportunities. Even his elder brother is an M. Tech. graduate. Then why would the girl’s side object to it?

V. immediately responded:

You don’t know, Madam. He had five arrear papers. He has not passed B.E. (Bachelors of Engineering). He is not a good student as you and others think. We are from here and we know about him.

As we were leaving his office, V. was giving us a send-off. At that time, he told me in near-whisper:

V: Madam, Gokulraj did not have a good character. He had affairs with several women. It is not only with Swathi.

PS: How did you know that?

V: He was running a video game center. Women used to visit it. In his mobile, he had saved the phone numbers of some women. He has also talked with them for hours as the mobile records show.

PS: Who told you about this?

V: The police told me.

PS: But saving phone numbers does not mean he had affairs with them.

V: No, Madam. Even a local evening newspaper in Tiruchengode edition reported about his character and all this.

As I listened to him and even after we left his place, I wondered why he shared those details only with me. Until then, I felt I was treated on par with Devibharathi and Kavitha, by whoever we interacted with. Devibharathi belongs to the Kongu region and he is from Vellakoil town. Kavitha and I are from Chennai city and the United States. Many of our conversationalists also knew Devibharathi quite well, though, as he told me, they were not his friends per se. Due to Devibharathi's presence, they did not feel any hesitation in sharing details with me as well in the first place, and conversations flowed smoothly. But with V., I could sense a change. What prevented him from making these remarks in front of my friends? Is it because Devibharathi would retort at once that no such report was published in the local newspaper? In fact, Devibharathi later confirmed my suspicions; no such news reports about Gokulraj had been published. Perhaps V. considered me, more than others, an outsider and, therefore, he would have thought I might readily buy into his arguments. But what about Kavitha? Is it because she is a journalist and could get the facts checked immediately through her press-related connections that he was prudent enough to exclude her? Or, was he thinking that sharing his prejudices with an academic writer from another country (he was aware

about my profession in the United States) was less risky than sharing them with a local, well-known journalist from Tamil Nadu? Did I use any Brahmanical slang inadvertently in my speech anytime? If so, did it make him think I would readily take in his views about Gokulraj? Or maybe I looked more gullible than the other two. It is also possible that I came across as friendlier to V. and that was why he was open to me. Of all the possibilities, the last one naturally gave me some hearty consolation.

After conversing with V., we met M. I., who is a young medical professional from the Kavundar caste. M. I. runs a clinic in Tiruchengode. She observed that when a Kavundar woman marries a Dalit man, it is “looked at as a loss of honour.” She also reflected on the local dynamics of gender discrimination in dealing with inter-caste marriages: “If a Kavundar man marries a Dalit woman, they might not make it a big issue. For they believe that after five years or ten years, he would leave her and come back (to his parents’ house). Parents would employ all kind of tactics to separate them as well. But if a Kavundar woman marries a Dalit man, it is considered a grave insult (*avamānam*).” She added:

MI: Due to fewer women being available for marriage in the Kavundar caste, men sometimes visit Kerala and bring brides from there. They simply say that their brides are of the Kavundar caste. No one probes into it. Only when a woman wants to transcend the caste barrier for the cause of love, it becomes an issue.

PS: Why fewer women in the Kavundar caste?

MI: Perhaps due to the single child norm adopted for the past thirty years or so. Having a single child and preference for a boy is the reason.

As M. I. reflected on this “double standard” among Kavundars, she also drew my attention to an economic factor, which she said operated against inter-caste marriages:

MI: After the Hindu Succession Act in 1989, women got a legal right in inheriting the ancestral property.<sup>18</sup> If they go out of their caste and marry, the property goes to another caste. Not only that. Even if a woman has an arranged marriage (i.e., a caste endogamous marriage arranged by parents and family), they don’t give her an equal share.

PS: Could you give me an example?

MI: For instance, if the household has 200 acres of land, they would give her only five or ten acres. The girl's husband also would not mind it, because he would do the same (discrimination) to his sister. Before the wedding of a daughter, her family makes her sign away her rights to property (*eluti vaṅkutaḷ*). It is a common occurrence in this region. If a woman loves and marries a Dalit, there is always the risk that she may ask for her due share at a future date.

I also had an opportunity to interact with Pon, an inhabitant of Vellodu near Erode. Pon is from the Nadar caste and he also shared his thoughts on "honour" as it is used in the Kongu region. According to him, "observing honour" is "*mēḷtaṭṭu jāti uṅaravu*" ('upper-strata caste feelings'). He added:

Pon: I am 36 now. Till four or five years back, I too observed honour. Now I think I have changed after reading books and being exposed to all of these atrocities like Gokulraj's murder.

PS: How do you think these feelings manifest?

Pon: Obviously in matrimonial matters (*kalyāṇa viṣayam*). But even in day-to-day interactions. Even today it is common for the Kavundar caste people to use "*vāṭā pōṭā*" when they talk to lower-caste people, irrespective of their age.

PS: Do you mean Dalits?

Pon: No, not just Dalits. That's the way they address us too.

PS: But *kauravam* means other things too. Even in Sivaji's movie *Kauravam*, it is all about prestige, isn't it?<sup>19</sup>

Pon: Yes, honour may be about wealth, education, and caste. But caste strikes us on the face.

In Vellakoil, I have had long conversations with some local shopkeepers and farmers from the Kavundar caste. "Genes," "lifestyle," and "financial status" figured in them as well, along with certain other dynamics. For instance, Ramkumar, a farmer from a village near Vellakoil, told me: "Every caste has its special gene." Rajkumar, a shopkeeper, nodded and said: "We have abolished untouchability. But why should we accept inter-caste marriage?" Arjunan, who is from the same village as that of

Ramkumar, added: “Can a Kavundar do business like Chettiyar? No. They are the business community.” He said he opposes inter-caste marriage because he thinks it pitches one caste against another. Arjunan added:

Already our agricultural “set up” is breaking.<sup>20</sup> It is due to the breakup of caste structure. Who do we need for agriculture? Matari (Cakkiliyars) and Canars (Nadars). But they want to become upper caste now. They are not ready to work. They have broken all the agricultural infrastructure. They have left our lands for employment in textile factories in Tiruppur. Before there was a mutual support (*ātaravu*) among castes. We measured and provided (*aḷantu koṭuttom*) grains to Matari. We supported (*ātarittōm*) barbers. We gave (*tantōm*) them an important place. Everything is broken now. Nobody needs anyone’s support.

Ramkumar intervened and said:

Madam, why should these men go to work in cloth manufacturing firms that profit foreigners? Why should they leave agriculture and lands?

When I asked them how they perceived Gokulraj’s murder, they at first denied they were aware of such incidents in their area. Later in the conversation, again I broached the topic:

Arjunan (A): (voiced tinged with anger) A Kavundar married a Dalit boy and eloped. They asked for money even to see that girl.

PS: Who asked for money?

A: Their caste leaders [Dalits]. Who else?

PS: Don’t you think killing is not a solution? After all, “our” own daughter desires (*asai*) (the Dalit man) and gets married ...

A: My question is: Why does she desire? Do we educate her for this? She should not desire. She has a family behind her. She has her parents who have raised her all these years. How many relatives does she have?

When Arjunan said this, Ramkumar nodded his head in agreement.

Ramkumar (R): She cannot live with them. Dalit culture will not suit her.

PS: How will it not suit her? She knows the boy already.

RK: We drop our daughters in our cars at their schools. Have you seen a Dalit's house? Simple life. They may not even have folding chairs. How can our daughter go and live there?

PS: Do you mean to say the financial status matters as well? But will you accept if your daughter loves a poor Kavundar man?

RK: Yes, financial status definitely matters. Even in our caste, we look for men of good status and character. But if she loves someone from our caste, we accept it because we have no other option.

I have given a few lengthy excerpts from my conversations to establish a broad framework for interpretation, and I will cite some more in the course of the essay. As the reader might have noticed, in some of the conversations, "honour" figures as a "feeling," as part of an inalienable "physiology," as a marker of day-to-day social interactions, and as a valuable relic of ancestors. Yet it is pertinent to note that wherever it appears, it simultaneously gets embedded in caste identity; in the discourse of marriage it indicates an urgent "preoccupation" with caste endogamy, especially regarding Kavundar women. It is important to pay close attention to verbs such as "providing," "supporting," and "giving" (to Dalits) that the Kavundars use, which reiterate hierarchical relations between castes. Factors like "globalization," "crisis in agricultural set-up," and women's "elopement" causing dishonor to the family do figure in the conversations, but they are not engaged in their own terms; these factors are criticized and resented because these are perceived to facilitate the breaking down of the caste hierarchy in their village or locality. Stalin Rajangam (2016:13) writes that even though changes in the agricultural production methods and life-styles and arrival of new technologies have happened along with globalization, all these are viewed by dominant caste members with a sense of anger that these changes have helped local (*uḷḷār*) Dalits make progress while degrading them.<sup>21</sup> In my conversations with them, too, the breaking of the caste hierarchy forms the core of the Kavundars' resentment against inter-caste marriages. Some said that inter-caste marriage is opposed by Kavundars as their tactic to contain gender

discriminatory economic transactions within the family; but economic reasons do not adequately explain why a Kavundar man, even if he is poor, is preferred in the marriage alliance, when men from other castes, even if they are well-educated, are not sought for or accepted.<sup>22</sup>

The inextricable relationship between “honour” and caste endogamy is reinforced by some Facebook posts as well. A post by Kongu Mani (October 8, 2015), signed with the hashtag #Kavundarboys announces:

We want to inform this to girls of our Kavundar caste. Whether you love boys of our caste or not, that is your personal matter. We don't want to interfere in it. But if you love boys from any other community (i.e., caste), we will always oppose it. Because it is not your personal issue (*piraccinai*). It is an issue of our caste (*inam*) and honour (*kauravam*).<sup>23</sup>

This post, shared publicly, emphasizes that falling in love with a man of a different caste is a matter of caste “honour.” Under this status message, the post contains an image of two men wielding spears and riding horses—perhaps invoking Dheeran Chinnamalai, a Kongu chieftain who lived in the colonial period—and a “punch line” inserted between the figures of the men: “There is none who has seen god, there is none who has triumphed over a Kavundan.” The same line has appeared in other posts as well. For instance, in a Facebook post shared by Dheeran Saravanan Gurusamy Gounder on February 7, 2016, this status message appears along with a picture of none other than Yuvaraj, the founder of the Kavundar association, the Dheeran Chinnamalai Peravai, and one of the alleged murderers of Gokulraj.<sup>24</sup>

A second Facebook post was shared by Karthikeyan Kavundar on 15 March 2016. The post, titled as “*kauravam*,” went like this:

Backward Castes like Kavundar, Devar, Vanniyar, Mudaliyar, Chettiyar and some others speak about themselves with pride, but they do not think of spoiling another household by involving themselves in clandestine relationships with the women of the family. But only these Dalit extremists, rather than loving women from their own caste, indulge in clandestine love drama<sup>25</sup> with upper backward-caste women, and consider this an achievement. Backward, dominant caste people, who have been living for a long time with honour, even if they have been living in poverty, and who would like to live with dignity (*mānam*) cannot accept this. When a father sees a man from a

caste whose members have grazed his cattle for a long time, who used to wrap their towels around their hips (in respect) on seeing him, and who received food from him obediently, puts his hand around the hip of his daughter—whom her father protected as a pupil of his eye for eighteen years, regarding her more than his life—and with the protection of the police takes her away, then the good-for-nothing father either would die fearing his dignity or he would take his [the Dalit youth's] life. This is the sign of the honorable life that he lived.<sup>26</sup>

In both posts, “honour” is invoked to insist on caste endogamy for women through regulating their sexuality and desire. The second Facebook post clearly says members of “Backward Castes” with “honour” and “dignity” cannot accept Dalit men loving their women. The post tends to define “honour” and “dignity” in terms of caste practices; and positing a “helpless” father against the powerful state (“police”), the post reframes the murder of a Dalit youth as the only available option aside from the father’s suicide. The first post draws a distinction between a Kavundar woman’s love within her own caste and outside her caste, identifying the former as a personal issue and the latter as a caste issue. The female sexuality that finds its trajectory in the form of love on its own is thus targeted for casteist regulation. In the second post, female sexual agency is completely denied in the fictive scene of “love drama.” The description of the Dalit man “putting his hand around the hip of his daughter” in a sense foregrounds female sexuality but only in the context of its simultaneous appropriation by the Dalit young man.

In understanding the significance of interlinked discourses of caste endogamy and female sexuality, emphasized by “honour,” a brief discussion of the marriage-related kinship practices of Kavundars would be helpful. Conventionally among Kavundars, not only caste endogamy, but endogamy within a subcaste (*uṭṭjāti* or *uṭṭpirivu*) and kindred (*vakaiyarā*) are observed along with clan (*kūṭṭam* or *kōttiram*) exogamy in marriage practices. Of all these caste endogamy is most important, according to author Perumal Murugan and a friend, Rajashankar.<sup>27</sup> In addition, clan exogamy is pertinent for arranging marriage alliances; as Brenda Beck (1972: 221) observes, “[f]or this dominant, landed group, it is clan membership, rather than the niceties of the cross-parallel terminology, that ultimately distinguishes marriageable from unmarriageable relations.”

The Kavundar clans are patrilineal. Perumal Murugan, the Tamil modern writer from the Kavundar caste, informed me that for the past three or four decades, the notion of *urimaippen*<sup>28</sup>—a girl on whom a man exercises his privilege or right to marry; for a Kavundar man it is usually his maternal uncle’s daughter—has almost disappeared. According to him, only clan exogamy is observed, and members of a clan are called “*paṅkāḷikaḷ*.” The children born out of the marital union would be identified by the father’s clan, and for males this identity is for life. Each clan is said to have descended from one male ancestor (‘father’), such as Chellan or Venduvan. The rule of clan exogamy is strictly followed by the Kavundars and it is considered “incestuous” to marry within one’s own clan.

The kinship category of Kavundar clan exogamy is reiterated by specific practices in the context of marriage. To cite a couple of them: the ceremony of “*parisam celuttal*” that takes place before the wedding ritual inscribes the positionality of the female in the network relations of the patrilineal clans. In this ceremony, the groom’s family gives a token amount of money (37.5 or 17.75 rupees) tied in a turmeric-stained cloth to the bride’s family.<sup>29</sup> Generally, the money received by the bride’s family would be offered to their clan deity’s temple. Pon informed me that this practice of giving money to the bride is from ancient days and could be associated with references to “*mulai vilai*” paid to the bride by the groom and his family in the Sangam poetry. “*Parisam celuttal*,” with a token-symbol of money transacted between the men of the bride’s family and of the bridegroom’s family, thus, enables the exchange of the woman between the two patrilineal clans. After the marriage, the woman would be taken to the temple of the husband’s clan deity (*kula teyvam*) for *paṭaiyal* offering to the deity. Through this offering, a change is effected in the woman’s clan deity. Before her marriage her clan deity is that of her father’s clan, and now it is her husband’s. This change actually amounts to her accommodation within her husband’s clan, as observed by Perumal Murugan.

The incest taboo among the exogamous Kavundar clans at the first instance resonates with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1969:51) structuralist kinship framework that insists on the exchange and circulation of women among exogamous clans, governed by the foundational taboo of incest. This Lévi-Straussian framework has been critiqued from diverse perspectives, and Judith Butler (2004) insightfully points out how this account buys into the “mode of exchange of women” as an inviolable universalist premise. In

this framework, Butler (2004:121) observes, the woman is reduced to a site upon which “compulsory heterosexuality” is inscribed, and through which something called “cultural identity” is perpetually reproduced:

[T]he incest taboo functions in Lévi-Strauss not only to secure the exogamous reproduction of children but also to maintain a unity to the “clan” through compulsory exogamy, as it is articulated through compulsory heterosexuality. The woman from elsewhere makes sure that the men from here will reproduce their own kind. She secures the reproduction of cultural identity in this way.

Exploring how the universal law of incest taboo “prefigured” the European “racist project” in reproducing phantasmatic “pure culture,” she observes that such reproduction is not merely premised on exogamy, but it is also governed by a “limit” inherent to this exogamy (ibid:121–122). While the taboo mandates that “marriage must be outside the clan,” there is a prohibition on “miscegenation” so that marriage does not take place “outside a certain racial self-understanding or racial commonality” (ibid:122).

In the Tamil context of the Kavundar caste, while exogamy founded on the incest taboo allows for an exchange of women among the patrilineal clans, endogamy with respect to caste, subcaste, and kindred all set a “limit” to this exchange. Within this “limit,” a phantasmatic “culture” of the caste, subcaste, and kindred group is reproduced through the norms of “compulsory heterosexuality.” When the “limit” of this exchange is transcended through inter-caste marriage or love of a Kavundar woman, it is considered as a tangible violation of the “culture.” The violation is perceived with more severity when the “limit” of the endogamous broader caste group is crossed over, compared to those of the subcaste and the kindred groups.<sup>30</sup>

## Contestatory Practices and Dalit Male Subject Positions

The mandatory marriage practices underscoring Kavundar kinship are not left uncontested by members of the Kavundar caste. Formidable alternate practices, challenging the kinship norms of exogamy and endogamy, have emerged strongly on the Kongu scene, especially with the spread of co-educational institutions and increased job opportunities for women.

However, when these contestatory practices are engaged in by a Kavundar woman they are vehemently opposed and dealt with, as we've already seen. Not only the woman, but her parents also suffer insult and/or retribution. At least four women who I met in Vellakoil expressed that it is the mother in particular who gets blamed for "lack of proper upbringing" (*oḷuṅkā vaḷarkkat teriyalai*), if her daughter has an inter-caste marriage/love affair, though the entire family might face the threat of excommunication from the community. According to M., while both parents would be blamed if their children fall in love with members of other caste, for daughters the "lack of proper upbringing" more readily remarked upon. If a woman "elopes" with a man of another caste, her parents would not be invited for temple festivals or weddings in their village forever, she added. Rupa, a twenty-three-year-old software engineer from Kavundar caste and from Erode, who presently lives in Chennai, recalled how she is reminded by her parents and relatives from time to time that a girl who marries a non-Kavundar man would be ill-mouthed in the community "for four generations" (*nāṅku talaimuraikku*). An elderly Kavundar woman in Vellakoil provided a slightly different picture, and Devibharathi's sister, who was present with me, immediately agreed with her remarks: "Ammā, even in the same caste people here don't readily accept love. When a woman loves, it is even more unaccepted. They would not encourage it at all and will do everything in their capacity to nip it in the bud or stop it." There is an inherent threat in acknowledging female desire per se, perhaps because it would amount to letting the door wide open for her desire to follow its own trajectory, disrespecting caste barriers. Indeed, the caste endogamy is incessantly haunted by the spectre of love of the daughters.

I have come across several Facebook posts, purportedly from Kavundar men and/or groups, slandering and condemning Kavundar women who marry outside the caste (also see discussion above for examples). A post titled "Notice against inter-caste marriage" that vigorously promotes endogamy in Kavundar caste has been circulated on Facebook. Some Facebook posts openly incite attacks on such women. Sometimes, the rallying point of the rage is the perceived loss entailed in the realm of woman's "reproductive use value" (Irigaray 1985:179–181; Parvulescu 2011:198) when she seeks a partner outside the caste: a post by a member of a group, called "Kavundacciyai Kātalikka Ninaikkum Cakkili Nāykaḷai Naṭu Rōṭṭil Viratti Viratti Veṭṭum Koṅku Nāṭu Karala Vamca Kavundarkaḷ Caṅkam" ('Association of Kongu Country's Karala Vamsa Kavundars Who Chase

Down the Road and Hack Cakkili Dogs Wanting to Love a Kavundar Woman'),<sup>31</sup> which was operating on Facebook last year (2016), attests to this. This group, which had more than 1800 members, was active at least until March 2016, and was sharing posts against inter-caste marriage involving Kavundar women. It has since been deactivated after several users reported it to Facebook administration. In some "popular" posts shared by this group, members gave forth the names and localities of Kavundar women who have been married to Dalits, thereby drawing the group's attention to such couples. One post by a member called "Kavundan Pollathavan" (meaning 'The Terrible Kavundan'), dated January 18, 2016, addressed Kavundar women. It was liked by thirty-five members and shared by two. It went like this:

Kongu Vellala Kavundaccis, do you know why you are begotten and educated? Only for marrying a Kongu Vellala young man and giving birth to his child one day. If you fail to perform that duty, it means you are losing your right to live.

The threats are not confined to the virtual world. "Kātalaip Piṛippōr Caṅkam" is an organization founded by Yuvaraj, the founder of the Deeran Chinnamalai Peravai, that has been quite active in Sangagiri and in other places in and around Namakkal, and its stated purpose is to separate inter-caste lovers. This organization, together with the Dheeran Chinnamalai Peravai, is known for settling "disputes" between families of inter-caste lovers, mostly involving Kavundar women, by issuing threats to their lovers and separating them.

Apart from such overt threats, and sometimes even murders, one significant way in which the caste group of Kavundars seeks to maintain the hegemony of the mandatory marriage practices is through discursive mediation at home and in public spaces, including political party meetings, caste group gatherings and virtual spaces such as social media. This discursive mediation, aimed to address young Kavundar women, constructs stereotypical subject positions of males of other castes. I will limit this discussion to point out how Dalit male subjectivity figures in the discursive mediation. Rupa, the young woman engineer, whom I cited earlier, spoke about the manner in which inter-caste marriages with Dalit men would be discussed at home. This was in response to my question

when I asked how her family reacted to Gokulraj's murder, especially considering they have her, a daughter of marriageable age. She said:

In our houses (*vīṭukaḷil*), whenever such news is heard they—my parents, aunt and sisters—talk about them. My family would make remarks like how this girl of our caste (*namma jātip poṇṇu*) loved a Dalit man, and how they were separated. They would also make references (*cuttik kāṭṭuvāṅka*) to how young girls who eloped with them were abandoned, after the money and jewels that the girl took with her were spent off (by the Dalit spouse). It is also common in our place to take girls to *mantiravāṭis* [those who practice magic] so that they forget the men [Dalit men] that they are in love with. Often it is done with the intention to mend (*tiruṭṭa*) the daughter's misguided ways.

Rupa said such incidents of murder would be discussed in the living room ("hall") in a rather loud voice so that the girls cannot miss hearing them and will thereby "follow (the) proper path." It is quite common, she told me, for female cousins in an extended family ("*citti poṇṇuṅka, māmā poṇṇuṅka*") to share with each other such "love narratives" of Kavundar girls with "Dalit boys" that they have heard in their towns, and the "sufferings that they experienced" (*anupavicca kaṣṭam*). Such narratives, she said, are circulated to discourage any possible "love affair" with a Dalit man.

In my earlier work on Tamil worship practices of the goddess Mariyamman, I cited a mythological narrative collected from the Kavundar caste of the Kongu region, which constructs the deity's husband, a Dalit man, as incestuous, abusive, lustful, and unintelligent (Srinivasan 2009). While the goddess's body is produced as the "social body," in the narrative the Dalit man's body was produced as an abject body "through the exclusionary signficatory practices of caste order" (Srinivasan 2009:338–339). Notwithstanding a tenuous connection between a mythological narrative and contemporary reality, there are certain discursive continuities at work in the construction of Dalit subject positions.

The infamous statement of S. Ramadoss, the founder and leader of the Pattali Makkal Katci (PMK, a Vanniyar-caste political party), on Dalits is a case in point. In 2012, a few months before Ilavarasan's death and just after Dharmapuri violence, Ramadoss tried to forge a grand alliance of all "intermediate" caste groups, including Kavundars, and organized several meetings to rally them against Dalits in Tamil Nadu. *The Hindu* (December

2, 2012) reported his statement, in which he “accused Dalit youth of fomenting social tension by filing false complaints under the law and ensnaring girls from other castes with bogus professions of love,” and that “[t]hey wear jeans, T-shirts and fancy sunglasses to lure girls from other communities.”<sup>32</sup> It Ramadoss who popularized the term “love drama” that quickly acquired currency among other dominant caste groups. In the discourses around Gokulraj’s killing too, the twin mutually influencing rhetorical strands in Ramadoss’s speech—that is, the Dalit man’s alleged “characterlessness” and his “false love”—regularly appeared. Dalit men “demanding money from the girl’s parents,” “engaging in inappropriate behavior with the girls in public,” “engaging in clandestine love drama,” or “lack of education skills” are common leitmotifs that we encounter in the discursive mediation advanced by the Kavundar caste.

The “Notice against Inter-caste Marriage” circulated by members of the Kavundar caste group among public and in social media gives a district-wise list of the numbers of Kavundar women who had inter-caste marriages. They are classified under categories like “divorced,” “who committed suicide,” “whose parents committed suicide.” The “Notice” has a section entitled “To Women: Consequences of Inter-caste (Clandestine) Marriage.” The section narrates women, who by cheating their parents in getting married in this way, make their parents shrink (in dishonor) in front of Government officers like police officers, disgracefully fall at the feet of them and their lovers, and cause others laugh at them. The “Notice” asserts inter-caste marriage of a Kavundar woman makes a “life-sacrifice” (*kavu koṭuttal*) of all the “honour” and “respect” that the family has hitherto maintained for generations. It renders their parents’ life meaningless thereafter, and even abets their suicide. The “Notice,” alluding to Dalit men, project them as those who love Kavundar women only for property, land, and money. It also warns the women that they may be ill-treated after marriage, abandoned, and tortured.

The discursive mediation of the Kavundar caste group, thus, does not merely locate Dalits at the bottom of the stratified caste scheme; rather, Dalit male subject positions are perpetually founded upon an arbitrary assemblage of despicable human traits. When “honour” figures in this mediation, it is invoked strategically as if it were an essential trait of the Kavundar caste group in the course of its reiterating that any violation of the mandatory kinship practices of marriage goes against the “culture” of

the caste group. However, alternate practices of inter-caste marriage and inter-caste love, since they happen occasionally, expose the arbitrariness of kinship practices and thereby show that the domain of the caste-group's "culture" is, after all, incoherent and contestable.

There have been responses to the unfair construction of Dalit subjectivities. A most significant counter-discourse came from the VCK leader Thol. Thirumavalavan at a public meeting (this speech was uploaded in September 2015 on YouTube):

These people [dominant caste men] lack dignity (*mānam*), lack shame. ... What they have been taught as dignity is nothing but the "woman matter." He [the dominant caste man] has jealousy that she [the dominant caste woman] does not look at him. He is fair complexioned, sports a moustache, wears a well-ironed shirt, costing a thousand rupees, and puts on a perfume worth several thousand rupees. She does not turn toward him. But she sees a poor Paraiyar, a Cakkili, or a Pallar, who live in huts and who are lowered in caste (*strata*). So, you [the dominant caste man] can understand how little you are worth (*kēṭukeṭṭa laṭṭanam*). The woman herself tells you your worth. "You are good for nothing. You have no stuff (*sarakku*). Even if he [a Dalit] is poor and suffers in poverty, he has stuff and grandeur." If you have dignity, you should hang yourself and die. But what does he do instead? "Even if you have spent ten months there, come back. I will wipe it. I will wash it. Come, let us live as man-and-wife." These people who lack dignity do such despicable politics. ...<sup>33</sup>

Thirumavalavan's discursive mediation of inter-caste marriage and love launches Dalit male subjectivities affirmatively, as it deconstructs *mānam*, a notion similar to *kauravam*, as nothing but the upper-caste's obsession with the "woman matter." Obviously Thirumavalavan takes a dig at dominant caste men, who have been inciting and engaging violence against Dalits and their dominant caste women spouses.

As a reputed leader of Dalits, his voice has a broader appeal to the Tamil society, and empathizing with this voice of support for Dalits is much needed. However, the woman figures in his speech in her familiar/familial positionality as a container, washed and wiped, or requiring washing and wiping. The time frame of ten months that he brings in his speech recalls the time of pregnancy, and the imagery of the female receptacle of the male semen/seed will not escape one's attention.

This shows that alternate practices in the form of inter-caste marriages, even if they disrupt the mandatory kinship practices of dominant caste groups, do not contest the “naturalist” foundation of the practices, namely the heteronormative fantasy of the family underscoring kinship. I do think practices that contest heterosexual arrangements and practices exist in the Tamil milieu, and unearthing them could go a long way in unsettling such fantasies. This, indeed, would be a worthwhile feminist project.

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## Notes

- 1 For details on this murder and the arrest of Yuvaraj, see Jhanardhanan 2015b. In a tragic turn of events, the deputy superintendent of police Vishnupriya, a Dalit woman officer, who was investigating the murder of Gokulraj, was also found hanging dead her house in September 2015. See Jhanardhanan 2015a.
- 2 Nineteen-year-old Ilavarasan had married Divya, a Vanniyar caste woman. After their marriage, since Divya refused to return to her parents’ home as decreed by an extra-judicial caste panchayat conducted by some local Vanniyar men, Divya’s father allegedly committed suicide. Soon thereafter three colonies of Dalits were ransacked and incinerated in Naikkankottai, Ilavarasan’s native village near Dharmapuri. After this incident, Divya “disowned” Ilavarasan during the hearing on a habeas corpus petition in Chennai High Court and returned to her mother’s home. Only a week after her separation from Ilavarasan, his body was found on the railway track, along with a “suicide” note. See Bhagat 2013, which gives a quick overview of incidents before and after Ilavarasan’s death.
- 3 Kausalya, who also suffered severe injuries in this gruesome attack that had been apparently planned by her parental family, survived it somehow. The police have arrested some of the perpetrators behind the murder, and investigations are going on. See Kumar 2016.
- 4 Kathir’s views can be found in Sivarajah 2016.
- 5 After Gokulraj’s murder, I wrote a couple of short articles in Tamil focusing on his killing, which were published in the magazine, *Kalachuvalu* (August 2015 and September 2015 issues). This essay, compared to those Tamil write-ups, provides more detailed conversations, attempts to engage with more rigorous theoretical frameworks, and draws from more diverse sources.
- 6 This news report, available online (Sruti 2017b), cites Kausalya:

Now, a year later, after going through the trauma of loss, Kausalya has decided to come out and fight the system of caste, the primary reason for the death of Shankar. Today, Kausalya is twenty-years-old. She has decided to work with women's organizations in the area. These organizations fight for the rights of women in a patriarchal society and steadfastly oppose the archaic and barbaric practice of honour killing. "There is plenty of work for me to do in this society now. I believe that I must fight against that which took Shankar away from me" says Kausalya. "Several organisations are working towards this cause, I have decided to work along with them" she added.

Also see Sruti 2017a. Recently, in April 2017, Kausalya met with Divya, who is still coping with the loss of her husband Ilavarasan, to express solidarity with her. See the report in Kolappan 2017, which states Kausalya is now working with a Central Government organization of India which seeks to raise awareness against "casteism and honour-killing."

7 In the "West," Abu-Lughod (2013:114) argues, it contributes to the representation of Muslim communities "as backward and prone to violence," as well as facilitates reframing international conflicts as "a clash of civilizations." Drawing upon Edward Said (1978), Aisha Gill (2014:177) has also observed that "Orientalist frameworks" have led the way in locating the honour based violence ("HBV") as a "manifestation of the 'culture clash' between immigrant cultures and Western culture."

8 The Tamil term "*kauravam*" is derived from the Sanskrit "*Gaurava*," meaning "heaviness," indicating "greatness." Even though the English term "honour" has been used in early scholarship for the Tamil term "*mariyātai*" (Price 1996; Mosse 1997), and, in addition, for "*mānam*" (Mines 2005), I employ "honour" for "*kauravam*" since this translation is quite commonly used in speech and writing by bilingual Tamil-English speakers. In my conversations, the Tamil word that sometimes changed place with *kauravam* is *mānam*, which I translate as "dignity." In the Tamil lexicon, the first two meanings given for "*mānam*" are both "*kauravam*" and "*karpu*." ("1. Honour, dignity; கௌரவம். நன்றேகாண் மானமுடையார் மதிப்பு (நூலடி, 294). 2. Chastity; கற்பு.)

9 Kathir, the founder of Evidence, says his organization has started employing this usage following its being used internationally (Facebook Status, 8 July 2015). He observes that there has been a stint of hard work behind this term for "ten years," since his organization has been "recording it continuously in the media," and that this term functions as a helpful strategy for drawing the larger international civil community's attention toward this violence. He suggests that if one prefers, "*ānavak kauravak kolai*" ('arrogance-honour killing') or "*varattu kauravak kolai*" ('vain-honour killing') can be substituted for "honour killing," but argues that "honour" should definitely be included for highlighting the violence as a "big issue." Nevertheless, of late, leaders and members of Vidutalai Ciruttaikal Katci (VCK, 'Dalit Panthers Party') employ the usage "*jāti-yānavak kolai*" (literally, 'caste arrogance killing'), and writers like Stalin Rajangam employ "*ānavakkolai*" ('arrogance killing') in referring to these killings.

10 This is available on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/mani.pongalur/posts/699891800051846>, last accessed May 6, 2017.

11 See <https://www.facebook.com/kongu.aalavanthar/posts/688093811336952>, last accessed May 6, 2017.

- 12 Instead of perceiving kinship as a pre-given and pre-established “structure of relations,” I tend to perceive it as a “doing” and as “an enacted practice,” following David Schneider and Judith Butler (2004:123).
- 13 By “culture,” I do not intend to mean any essential or static or homogeneous entity, rather I employ this heuristically, and, following Butler (2004:124), as a “place holder for a past position.”
- 14 Coimbatore, Nilgiri, Tirupur, Erode, Namakkal, Salem, Karur, Dharmapuri, and Krishnagiri administrative districts in Tamil Nadu are generally considered to be part of the Kongu region (conversation with Devibharathi and M.).
- 15 See <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/student-held-for-abetting-suicide/article4776998.ece>, last accessed May 6, 2017. How far the police investigations are reliable regarding these acts of violence is a genuine question.
- 16 An article by D. Karthikeyan (2013) in *The Hindu* reported an incident “in which a Vanniyar boy married a girl belonging to the Kongu Vellalar caste (was) separated on the basis of caste hierarchy,” and the girl was forced to undergo an abortion by her parents.
- 17 For the Facebook post see: [https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%E0%AE%9A%E0%AF%86%E0%AE%A8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%82%E0%AE%B0+%E0%AE%AA%E0%AF%8A%E0%AE%9F%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%9F%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B5%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%A3%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A9%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF/keywords\\_top](https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%E0%AE%9A%E0%AF%86%E0%AE%A8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%82%E0%AE%B0+%E0%AE%AA%E0%AF%8A%E0%AE%9F%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%9F%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B5%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%A3%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A9%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF/keywords_top), last accessed May 6, 2017. Also, I recognize the ways that social media can actively mediate the identity construction of a caste group. My interest in this essay, however, is more about analyzing the discourses of caste identities and hegemony rather than exploring the role of media in the process.
- 18 As per the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, daughters had equal rights as sons in their father’s self-earned property when the father died intestate. However, they did not have rights to inherit the ancestral property. The Hindu Succession (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 1989 was passed to give equal rights to women as men in the ancestral property.
- 19 There are two Tamil movies with the title “*Kauravam*.” In the movie released in the year 1973, directed by Vietnam Veedu Sundaram, “honour” is all about professional success and prestige associated with it. The more recent film was released in the year 2013 and was directed by Radha Mohan. This movie’s narrative plot is built around the theme of “honour killing.” It initially incited the ire of Kavundar caste “leaders” like Pongalur Manigandan, the state secretary of the outfit called Kongu Velalak Kavundarkal Peravai. The Peravai announced protests, but the movie got released successfully.
- 20 Kongu Vellala Kavundars are one of the major land-owning caste groups in Tamil Nadu. Kalyan Raman, a Tamil writer and translator, reminded me about how their land ownership goes together with their “superior” caste status compared to Dalits, who have meagre land-related resources, and therefore, have to work the lands of Kavundars.
- 21 Rajangam (2016:13) calls this “cultural anger” (*paṇṇāṭṭuk kōbam*) of the dominant castes, which is tapped by political parties in electoral processes.

- 22 See my conversations with M. I. earlier.
- 23 See [https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8A%E0%AE%99%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%BF+%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%A9%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8C%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/keywords\\_top](https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8A%E0%AE%99%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81+%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%BF+%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%A9%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D+%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8C%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/keywords_top), last accessed May 6, 2017.
- 24 See [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1556774334642375&id=100009294701741](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1556774334642375&id=100009294701741), last accessed May 6, 2017.
- 25 “*Nāṭakak kātal*” or “love drama” is a phrase used by S. Ramadoss, the founder-leader of PMK, and has gained currency in the anti-love and anti-inter-caste marriage rhetoric in the last four years. See [http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil\\_nadu/article1388169.ece](http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil_nadu/article1388169.ece), last accessed May 6, 2017.
- 26 See <https://www.facebook.com/karthikeyan.karthi.5243817/posts/685167858290352>.
- 27 While exploring sub-caste and kindred categories among Kongu Vellala Kavundars is not a primary goal of this article, it might be useful to give examples for these divisions. Balasubramaniam from Coimbatore informed me that Sentalai Vellalak Kavundar, Nattuk Kavundar, Palavellalak Kavundar, and Sanku Vellalak Kavundar are some of the sub-castes of the Kongu Vellalak Kavundar caste. Similarly, Nattar, Kaniyalar and Kudivantavar are the kindred groups within a sub-caste like the Sentalai Vellalak Kavundar sub-caste. As Lina Fruzzetti, Akos Ostor, and Steve Barnett (1992:15) have pointed out, unlike in Bengal, in Tamil Nadu, “[u]nits of hierarchy (caste, subcaste, kindred) act as wholes toward each other...,” and arranging marriage within one’s sub-caste and kindred is preferred.
- 28 On a discussion of *urimaippen* in the Kongu region, also see Beck 1972:237–238.
- 29 This practice among Kavundars requires more research.
- 30 Transcending sub-caste and kindred boundaries in marriage practices, and how they are perceived by the sub-caste and kindred groups merit a separate study. In a phone conversation after I returned to the United States, M. I. told me that even these are not taken “lightly,” though they don’t end up in “honour killing,” or, for that matter, in “ex-communication from the caste.” However, according to Rajashankar, a friend from Coimbatore, sub-caste and kindred categories are not given importance in marriage alliances, but endogamy within the Kavundar caste group and clan exogamy are followed strictly even today.
- 31 Cakkiliyars are one of the most oppressed Dalit caste groups inhabiting the Kongu region.
- 32 See Kolappan 2012. Also see Radhika Santhanam and Sruthisagar Yamunan’s (2016) opinion piece in *The Hindu* in which they refer to the attempt by the PMK to forge “a larger non-Dalit, OBC [Other Backward Caste] alliance against inter-caste marriages” in detail:

This movement emboldened hitherto nondescript fringe casteist groups to openly indulge in hate mongering, which took the form of open and divisive campaigns even on college campuses. The party deemed many such marriages “love dramas” in which Dalit youth sporting “jeans pants” and “sunglasses” lured

unsuspecting upper caste women only to swindle their wealth and dump them later.

33 Thol. Thirumavalavan's speech has been shared on the YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvdsb0dT2f8>, last accessed May 6, 2017.

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