The Mathammas
Gender, Caste and the Politics of Intersectionality in Rural Tamil Nadu

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There has been hardly any scholarly engagement with patriarchal practices that link caste, gender and land relations in the case of dalits. The ways in which consideration of caste status or honour partake in patriarchy in the context of dispossessed and socially excluded communities may not be similar to the invocation of brahmanical patriarchal values. This paper attempts to capture the complexities involved in conceptualising the caste patriarchy among the dalits through their narratives and that of the upper castes, women social activists and the state on a ritual practice prevalent among the Arunthathiyars, a dalit sub-caste in rural Tamil Nadu – the dedication of Arunthathiyar girls and women to the goddess Mathamma.

It was the summer month of Vaikasi-Anni, the month of Mathamma festival in our village and I was then seven years old. My relatives and parents decorated me as a bride and placed me in front of the goddess Mathamma for the wedding. An elaborate ritual followed with offerings of coconut and camphor. Vessels filled with fresh grain, lemon, milk, turmeric water and cows’ urine were offered to the temple. Amidst drum beat, dancing and drinking, with a pestle dipped in turmeric water and milk, I was marked as a Mathamma. An elderly woman from our community tied the thali. From then on as a young girl dedicated to the Goddess Mathamma, I have been dancing in several villages during this festival and earned my livelihood. Men offered money and gifts and offered themselves too. Caste was not a constraint for choosing my sexual partner but when we make our choices, our caste men and our families intervene and regulate our lives since we the Mathammas are dependent on them for our livelihood.

(Interview with Devi Mathamma, Valluvapuram village, 14 September 2010).

Conceptualising Caste Patriarchy

Much work has been done to demonstrate how caste patriarchy centres on regulation of female sexuality and labour. Uma Chakravarti, for example, has brilliantly demonstrated how in the case of upper castes, control over women’s sexuality in the form of enforced widowhood served as an index for establishing higher rank in the caste system. In the specific case of Tamil Nadu, the debates around the abolition of the devadasi custom among the non-brahmin castes clearly bring out the intimate linkage between caste honour and control over women’s sexuality. However, such studies have only engaged with the work and working of the brahmanical patriarchy and how various higher castes either reinforce or contest patriarchal practices.

There has been very little scholarly engagement with patriarchal practices that link caste, gender and land relations in the case of those men and women who are at the receiving end of the caste structure, such as the dalits. The ways in which consideration of caste status or honour partakes in patriarchy in the context of dispossessed and socially-excluded communities may not be similar to the invocation of brahmanical patriarchal values. But, status considerations even among the most oppressed communities do result in the reproduction of the relative subordination of women and the upholding of the caste structure and ideology. This paper attempts to capture the complexities involved in conceptualising the caste patriarchy among the dalits through the narratives of the dalits, upper castes, women social activists, and the state on a ritual practice prevalent among the Arunthathiyars, a dalit sub-caste.
in rural Tamil Nadu. The practice in question is the dedication of Arunthathiyar girls and women to the goddess Mathamma.

**Arunthathiyars, Paraiyars and Naidus**

In the northern districts of Tamil Nadu – especially in Vellore, Thiruvallur and Kancheepuram districts – there is a substantial population of Arunthathiyars who are treated as “untouchables among the untouchables”. They are mostly Telugu-speaking landless agricultural labourers working for Telugu-speaking Naidu landowners in many villages in the region. They are identified in the region as Chakkilars, Madigas, and other dalit sub-caste, has taken to non-farm employment, land continues to define caste relations in most of these villages. Given their acute economic and social disadvantages, the Arunthathiyars, in large numbers, continue to depend upon the landowning Naidus for their livelihood.

My research was carried out in Valluvapuram village which is located in Thiruthani taluk of Thiruvalluvar district. The village has five hamlets, each occupied by different caste groups. The oor or the so-called village proper is primarily occupied by upper-caste Kamma Naidus. Dalits, mainly the Paraiyars, live in the cheri or colony. There is a separate hamlet known as Adi-Andhrawada, which is occupied by the Chakkilars or the Arunthathiyars. Adi-Andhrawada is referred to as chakkilipalayam by the villagers. Bangarukannapalli, yet another hamlet in the village, is occupied only by the Idaiyars, who were traditionally shepherds. The colony of the tribal Iru-lars is tucked away along the side of the oor. The Arunthathiyar population in the village is substantial with about 250 households. As everywhere else in Tamil Nadu, given the decline of agriculture and due to the lack of access to higher education closer to the village, a significant number of Naidu families have migrated to Chennai and other cities. At present, there are about 140 families in the oor.

The most impoverished caste in the village is the Arunthathiyars, who are, as mentioned above, mainly dependent on agricultural work either as labourers or as tenants of the Naidu landowners. While 50 Arunthathiyar households are cultivating land for the Naidus, only five of them own land ranging from six to 10 cents (1 cent = \(\frac{1}{100}\) acre) in extent. Due to the decline in agricultural work, the colony of Paraiyars survives by combining all kinds of non-farm employment with little agricultural work. Most of them work as construction labourers or as head load workers in Chennai’s wholesale vegetable market located in Koyambedu. They also occasionally work as caterers, tailors, electricians and so on in the informal service sector. However, unlike the Paraiyars, the Arunthathiyars, due to lack of access to education and employment, are by and large forced to be dependent on agricultural work. Some of them tend the cattle of the Naidu landowners.

Their dependency on the Naidus is well-captured by an Arunthathiyar woman thus:

...my husband gets a weekly salary from the Naidus for herding sheep.

His and my wages from agricultural work is insufficient to survive on, leave alone educating my children. We are forced to borrow money from the Naidus and when we are unable to repay, we have to work unpaid. We are at their beck and call.

Since the Paraiyar women no longer undertake domestic work or any menial work for the dominant castes, only the Arunthathiyar women work as domestic labourers in the Naidu houses. This also defines their continued social and economic subordination to the Naidus.

**Compromise, Not Confrontation**

The Arunthathiyar women increasingly share the burden of agricultural work, since men in recent years are slowly taking up non-farm employment – though not comparable to the Paraiyars. Their interaction with the Naidu men often leads to sexual exploitation. The Arunthathiyar women find little support from their caste or from their men in resisting such exploitation. Pullamma from the Adi-Andhrawada notes,

If a Paraiyar woman is abused, she strongly retaliates since her men provide support and the woman talks back with guts. If we ever do such a thing, our men will not let us into our colony. Our caste elders are for compromise and not for confrontation with the Naidus. Even if we are abused by our caste name, we cannot get angry or quit working for the Naidus.

In a similar vein Chengalvarayan reasoned that they are silent on violence faced by women, since the Arunthathiyar men are still subservient to the Naidus. These statements point to the extreme marginality of the Arunthathiyars in the village.

The ritual practice of dedicating Arunthathiyar girls and women to the goddess Mathamma forms part of their caste subservience. However, to merely read this ritual practice as the reinforcement of caste hierarchies is to leave out many complexities. The practice is closely tied to the production and reproduction of gendered subjectivities in the context of changing caste relations within the village.

**Legend of Mathamma**

The legend of Mathamma as narrated by the Arunthathiyars is similar to that of Mariamman, a popular mother goddess worshipped mainly by the outcastes across the region. The legend of Mariamman had been developed from the brahmanic and Sanskrit versions of the story of Parasurama, who beheaded his mother on the order of his father. The severed brahmin head was refixed with an “untouchable” body, and thus emerged the goddess Mariamman. As Paul Younger observes, the Mariamman legend is an attempt at reconciliation between the brahmans and the non-brahmins with the creation of Mariamman out of the “switched bodies” of “pure” and “impure” castes. The goddess is constructed as a virtuous and powerful woman who punishes the oppressors and cares for the well-being of the lower-caste followers.

While the Amman worship and the associated legends across the state are similar, they have evolved in specific contexts of inter-caste relationships accommodating the lived material and social realities. For instance, in Valluvapuram, the Arunthathiyars relate the power of Mathamma, as in the case of Mariamman, to the highly contagious disease of smallpox.
pox and also to her healing abilities. But, they also look at Mathamma as containing uncontrollable sexuality and as a formidable feminine force that needs to be pacified through the mediation of the Arunthathiyars and through the dedication of women. This particular construction appears to have emerged from their close connection with the Madiga ritual traditions in Andhra Pradesh. Being located at the border of Andhra Pradesh, the Arunthathiyars in these villages relate this tradition to the Telugu version of worship and to their dependent relationship with the Naidu.

In analysing the relationship between castes and the worship of village deities, Fuller contends that these are “no oppositional religion of the oppressed” and that they “cannot symbolise the equality and liberation of the lower castes”. One can only partially agree with this analysis. The lower caste ritual traditions have also enabled the dalits to negotiate their powerlessness. Such rituals or religiosity has been also invoked to distance themselves from carrying out “impure” occupations within the rigid caste hierarchy. Thus, the ritual space and the construction of such traditions can be important sites of reconstituting one’s self-identity and producing alternative moral discourses by contesting notions of untouchability and injustice.

For instance, the construction of Mathamma as fierce and erotic has made the upper-caste Naidu and the Idaiyars to worship her as the village goddess and patronise the Mathemmas, women dedicated to the goddess, and the Mathamma stories, fire walking, goat-biting and the sacrifice of a buffalo, the meat of which is then shared with the Arunthathiyar households that have contributed money for the festival.

In recent years, with the upward mobility of the Paraiyars, who now set the standard for social status among the dalit sub-castes, the Arunthathiyars have modified this ritual practice. And the legend itself has undergone several changes accommodating some of these social changes. However, the festival continues to be conducted and the Arunthathiyars are unwilling to give up the practice of dedicating women to the goddess Mathamma for various reasons, which I will explore in detail.

**Mobilising the Mathammas**

In 2002, this practice of dedicating women as well as the position of the Mathammas has received the attention of dalit women activists, who attempted to mobilise the Mathammas against what they considered as an exploitative custom. Following this, there were a series of reports in the local newspapers which marked out this practice as the continuation of the devadasi custom and the Arunthathiyars as perpetuating it. This campaign led to the intervention of the state functionaries. When the state officials tried to ban the Mathamma festival on the ground that it was vulgar, the Arunthathiyars chose an elderly man to perform the role of Mathamma.

Among the 75 villages in Thiruvalur and Vellore districts, Valluvapuram has the largest number of Arunthathiyar women dedicated to the goddess Mathamma. The village has a fairly large Mathamma temple in the middle of the Arunthathiyar settlement. Ever since the Rural Women’s Liberation Movement (RWLM) of SREP began in 2002 to organise the Mathammas into an organisation known as Mathamma Pengal Maruvazhvu Pathukappu Nala Sangam (Mathamma Women’s Rehabilitation, Protection and Welfare Association), the figure of Mathamma has become central to the defining of caste relations and also a site of contestation for caste and gender rights.

The detailed accounts of the ritual practice inform us that, unlike in Andhra Pradesh, Mathammas in these villages do not have the ritual power of a priest. This is so because they are not allowed to officiate at the temple rituals. There is a separate male priest to carry out these rituals. The ritual identity of the Mathammas is limited as they are treated as mediators with the goddess only during the festival. Thus, their position is not similar to that of the sule, santi or jginis. They are considered neither “auspicious”, nor as embodiments of the power of the goddess – unlike in the case of the erstwhile non-dalit devadasis.
The Mathammas mainly earn their living from the meagre offerings from men who pin money on their blouses when they dance, and most of them work as agricultural labourers, and earlier as domestic workers for their landlords. Despite their ritual status as “ever married” to god, most of them lived with partners chosen either by their families or by themselves. Their sexual partners are mostly from their own caste or from the men of their dance troupe. The Mathamma rituals offer us insights into how this practice plays an important role in sustaining the caste dominance of the Naidus and also how it defines inter-caste relations within the village. Young girls from the Arunthathiyar families are dedicated to goddess Mathamma after the cure of an acute illness or physical deformities of family members, including the girl herself. The elaborate rituals followed during the dedication ceremony, define the power of the Naidus and the control exercised by the Arunthathiyar elders over the Mathamma women.

According to Mathammas, it is not merely the maternal uncle who plays an important role in providing for the ceremony of initiation, but also the Naidu landlord who contributes significantly by offering special gifts in kind and money during the festival. It is a Naidu man who has to bless the thali (mangalsutra) to be tied around the young girl’s neck. As part of the dedication ceremony, she is made to dance in front of every Arunthathiyar household and the special anklets for the dance are tied by the temple priest. The priest is chosen by the Arunthathiyars to officiate at the dedication ceremony. The Idaiyars too have a significant presence during this ceremony as they are specially honoured during the Mathamma temple festival. During the five-day festival, the Idaiyars are invited to take part in the fire walking as also the Naidus. The karagam dancers first visit the oor and the Idaiyar settlement. In short, both the act of dedicating girls to the goddess Mathamma and the Mathamma festival reinforce the power and the social position of upper castes.

In so doing, the colony Paraiyars are not allowed to participate in the fire walking and the karagam dancers do not enter their area. The Arunthathiyari young men and women claim that during the festival they ensure that the Paraiyars do not enter the fire bed or steal away even a piece of coal. The Paraiyars are merely permitted to watch the festival, and their offerings to the goddess are accepted on other days, but not during the festival. Confirming this practice of excluding the Paraiyars from the festival, Munniamma claimed,

We do not collect money from the colony people for the festival. They have no role in the festival. They could come if they wish and could offer camphor and coconut in front of the temple. But they are strictly prohibited from the fire walking. This has been the tradition. But the Naidus are invited and they donate money, do fire walking and have a share in everything.

Various accounts given by the Arunthathiyars and also by the Naidus, indicate how crucial the Mathamma festival and the dedication of the Arunthathiyar girls have been in sustaining the caste hierarchy in the village. The Arunthathiyars claim the Mathamma practice as a marker of their distinct caste identity in contrast to the colony Paraiyars. They are also eager to associate this practice as part of their closer affinity with the Naidus and the Idaiyars. The Naidus acknowledge this festival and the dedication of women as important events for offering patronage to the Arunthathiyars. They also often mention that no such privilege is offered to the colony Paraiyars. As Subarayalu, an elderly Naidu, confessed,

We have our own Narasimha Samy festival and the god makes a ritual tour of all the five streets in the oor. But it does not enter the Paraiyar colony. Even the idol does not face their side though it may face the side of the Arunthathi Palayam. We may go to the Adi Andhrawada for the Mathamma festival but never to the colony for any of their festivals.

Rationalising Exclusion

Equally important is the way in which the colony Paraiyars perceive their exclusion from the Mathamma festival. Acknowledging that they have been considered marginal to the ritual world of the village, the young colony Paraiyars portray these practices as merely reinforcing the caste dominance of the Naidus and the submissiveness of the Arunthathiyars. Rationalising their absence in the festival, Irudhayaraj, a Paraiyar youth, said,

Oor people are generally scared of the colony youths. They fear that we might pick up a fight during the festival... Usually when the Mathammas dance, we tease them as well as those who organise the dance. At such times, the Arunthathiyars keep quiet but the oor people convert this into a fight. So they avoid us... We are not for this kind of festivals and do not look forward to the blessings of the Naidus or the Mathammas. Our only concern is to get as many facilities as possible for our colony. We do not mind walking to the government offices instead of the oor or to the Mathamma temple.

Similarly another Paraiyar youth, Velu, noted,

When the Narasimha Samy festival takes place in the oor, some of us do go there but stand at a distance and break coconuts and come back. Normally we do not resist the restrictions to our entry into the temple but now some like us courageously enter the temple. The Adi-Andhras do not allow us to do the fire walking during the Mathamma festival. But they permit the Naidus. The Naidus provide money for the festival. The Mathammas also could go to them (indicating that the Naidus have sexual control over the Mathamma women). Very young girls are dedicated to the Mathamma and neither the Arunthathiyar men nor the women raise objections. They would say it is their tradition. Basically it is a compromise between the Naidus and the Arunthathiyars.

The different articulations on the practice of inclusion and exclusion during the Mathamma festival centre around two important issues. One is the significant Paraiyar mobility beyond the village, which has provided new resources for them to challenge their marginalisation within the village. In this context, they view their exclusion from the Mathamma festival as a consequence of their relatively superior economic and social status. The second is the Arunthathiyars’ attempt to cope with their comparatively lower caste status accorded to them, especially by the Paraiyars, due to their continuing subservience to the Naidus. Significant is the Arunthathiyar youth’s recent attempt to raise their social and cultural status through invisibilisation of the Mathammas and their sexuality. Now, let me turn to these two aspects that have contributed to the discourse on the abolition of the Mathamma practice.
**Mobility of Paraiyars**

During the past 10 years, with access to higher education and employment outside the village, the conditions of the Paraiyars in Valluvapuram has significantly improved to the extent that they are treated as equal to the middle castes in the village – especially in terms of their socio-economic conditions. While income from non-farm employment has considerably contributed to the Paraiyar autonomy, access to government welfare schemes has also improved their social status.24 A significant outcome of this mobility is their refusal to carry out caste-based occupations, unlike the Arunthathiyars.28 The Paraiyars also strongly resist any caste-based discrimination within the village and assert their rights. This, in turn, provides models of resistance for Arunthathiyars to claim higher status and to contest their subordination. It is against this context of the Paraiyar mobility, that the Arunthathiyar youths are reconstructing their caste identity by means of recasting the Mathammam’s gender identity.

The Arunthathiyar youth26 contend that unlike them, the Paraiyars have benefited from government schemes and, therefore, have managed to raise their social and economic status. Instances of how the Arunthathiyars have been excluded from the Kalaigainar Housing Scheme, the old-age pension scheme, and subsidised bank loans are adduced to show how preference is given to the Paraiyars in state welfare schemes.77 The youths note that state officials and the Paraiyars denigrate them as “backward” and treat them as incapable of benefiting from such welfare measures. This backwardness of the Arunthathiyars is claimed to be reflected in the practice of dedicating girls to the goddess Mathamma.

In order to resist such characterisation, the Arunthathiyar youths recode the Mathamma practice as providing a higher status to them. Thus, they use this practice, as mentioned above, to distinguish themselves from the colony Paraiyars. Simultaneously, they draw on models of resistance from the Paraiyars to contest their caste subordination. While narrating their differences with the Paraiyars, these youths simultaneously acknowledge the Paraiyars’ struggles against untouchability.

Anxious to discount them being designated as “backward”, especially by the Paraiyars,28 the Arunthathiyar youths, at times, claim the Mathamma practice as a thing of the past. At other times, they defend the practice as “internal” to their caste and that therefore “outsiders” should not interfere in it. They deny that the practice has anything to do with the devadasi custom of sexual labour and render it as a purely religious practice. For example, a pamphlet issued by the Arunthathiyar Liberation Movement (ALM) against a documentary film made on the Mathammam by the SRED, renders this practice as a religious/ caste custom with no sexual connotations. They also attempt to reconstruct the sexuality of the Mathammams as monogamous and chaste. To quote from the pamphlet,

Mathamma is the Goddess of the Arunthathiyar community... the children who are named after this Goddess... tied with a talisman with the symbol of this Goddess around the neck. This religious custom is known as Pottukattuthal (‘tying a symbol’). These women get married like all our community women and lead normal life. These facts have been wilfully omitted by the women’s groups.29

Thus, the Mathammas are reconstructed as “religious women” who are under the control of the community, and not “sacred prostitutes” as they have been portrayed.30 The claim that this practice is not similar to the devadasi custom, borders around issues of emasculation, shame and honour. This is particularly so for the young Arunthathiyar men who desire to bring about changes along the lines of the Paraiyars. One of the important ways in which they are overcoming their sense of marginality and emasculation is by strictly controlling the Mathamma women.

Ever since the state officials and the women’s sangam have demanded a ban on the practice, the Arunthathiyar caste panchayat has decided to surveil closely the Mathammas. They are not allowed to meet the members of the women’s sangam. It has also protested against the entry of women activists into their hamlet.31 As one of the Mathammams from the village noted,

The youths dissuade everyone who comes to enquire about this practice. The officials who came to our area were chased away by them. They vehemently denied that there was dedication of women or dancing by them. We were threatened to be silent.

Another Mathamma confessed,

Once I was forced by our (caste) panchayat elders to speak to the officials about how we, women from the community, have been humiliated and embarrassed by the actions of the women’s sangam. Some times, they negotiate with the officials to continue this practice. What they are doing is virtually holding kattapanchayats (kangaroo courts) to control us...

This control should not be seen as something new. It is a continuation and intensification of the pre-existing control over the sexuality of the Mathammams by the Arunthathiyar men and the Arunthathiyar caste panchayat. In this regard, the Mathammams contest the construction that they enjoy the right to choose anybody as partners, unlike other women. Devi, for instance, recollected how the Arunthathiyar caste panchayat fined her when she brought home a Paraiyar man as her partner. Since she refused to pay the fine, she was forced to leave her village. Some of them point out that because of their ritual status as “being married to the god”, their sexual partners could not be made responsible for their families and that the men invariably abandoned the Mathammams and their children. And, they are forced to depend on their maternal family for their security.

**Devising Strategies of Mobilisation**

In the context of the Arunthathiyar men’s strong resentment against the mobilisation of the Mathammams, the SRED’s representation of the Mathammams as victims and their demand for the ban of the practice acquire importance. In 2001, the RWLM at the SRED, while organising a cultural programme, came across the practice of dedicating young girls to the goddess. Recounting how the movement began to
show interest in the issue of Mathammas, a coordinator from the SRED said,

In one village as we were making enquiries about the practice of dedicating women, news of a Mathamma who died during dancing was brought to our notice. We learnt that she died of AIDS and she was a victim of sex work. We then followed this up by asking people in the village about the custom and practice of dedicating young girls. Several details related to the practice revealed to us that a section of women, in the name of religion and caste custom, have been sexually and economically exploited mostly by the upper caste men such as the Naidus and Vanniars.

Over the course of a decade, the SRED adopted several strategies to address the issues of sexual and economic vulnerabilities of the Mathammas. After a brief survey among the Mathammas with the help of the RWLM, they were organised into a sangam which took up the issue of banning the practice. The sangam made representations to the district collector to intervene and campaigned in public forums. Media was also mobilised to raise this issue with the state. This has led to, as noted in the previous section, severe restrictions and control over the Mathammas who were not allowed to meet women activists.32

After facing opposition, the sangam changed its strategy to address the issue of livelihood of the Mathammas by introducing welfare programmes. In Valluvapuram, six Mathammas were provided with milch cows. Some of them were helped to start rice vending and other small businesses. The sangam has been actively taking up the issues of housing, old-age pension, ration cards and government loans for the Mathammas. It has also trained them to take part in panchayat elections and made them aware of their legal and economic rights. These, in effect, according to the sangam and some Mathammas, have brought them social respect within the village, but also severe restrictions within the caste.

As one Mathamma from a neighbouring village confessed,

I joined this sangam about eight years ago and only after joining, I gained courage. Despite being an illiterate, I have developed skills to negotiate with the officials. I have taken up a case of rape in our village with the police, I have approached the collector for government schemes, and now there is some respect for me within the caste.

Similarly Devi stated that after contesting the panchayat election people in her village did not dare to address her as a “wayward” woman and began to give her some respect. Their claim to their original names instead of being addressed as a “victims” as “beneficiaries”, with an unintended consequence of the Mathammas expecting the SRED to fulfil their economic needs. While self-critically reflecting on this process, the treasurer of the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women’s Movement, an important office-bearer of the SRED, states,

In this particular village (Valluvapuram), they are aware of the dalit women’s movement but they expect some economic benefits. We tried that too. It did not work. The Mathammas were selling dry meat in the Arunthathiyar area. So we thought that they might take to entrepreneurial work. It failed. This is what taught us a lesson and we brought them back on the track of movement-building to assert their right and not to turn them into beneficiaries.

While the women’s organisation was oscillating between representing the Mathammas as victims/beneficiaries and as rights-claiming activists, the Mathammas relate to such politics of reform and representation politics in complex ways. From our conversations with the sangam activists, it is clear that the Mathammas are not interested in the abolition of the practice and a very few have stopped dancing in the festival. And those who did were mainly the old women who were no longer patronised. Some even stated that they earn more money by dancing than doing agricultural work.33 However, this is not a common experience as many did not get an opportunity to earn through dancing. The Mathammas also claim that all lower-caste women are subjected to sexual exploitation by the landlords, and thus the position of the Mathammas is not unusual or different. According to them, their sexual subjection is not necessarily ritually sanctioned and the ritual practice of dedication has very little connection with their being sexually exploited by the upper castes.

Also, once the state and the women’s organisation have constituted them as “beneficiaries”, several of them do not want to give up their Mathamma identity. They are keen on getting their ration cards, houses under the free housing scheme, and employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).34 This is possible only by retaining their Mathamma identity, and not by renouncing it.

Conclusions

The above account is one of multiple ambiguities and half-told stories. First of all, while the ritual dynamism of the worship of the Mathammas enables the Arunthathiyars to negotiate their caste subordination to a certain degree with the upper-caste Naidus and the Idaiyars, the gender status of the dedicated women is not improved by attributing ritual powers to them. In other words, the claim to symbolic power by the Mathammas does not translate into social power as is evident from their economic and social vulnerabilities. Contrarily, it has reproduced the caste power of the Naidus by means of their key role in the dedication ceremony and the festival. In addition, the Mathammas’ primary outcaste status has positioned them below the other caste women.

Second, the instrumental ways in which gender was mobilised to claim caste status by the Arunthathiyar youths, in the face of the upward mobility of the colony Paraiyars, has not benefited the Mathammas. The Arunthathiyars’ representation of the Mathammas as monogamous and chaste and of the
practice itself as having no sexual connotation can enable them to overcome their humiliation in public. But the Mathammas continue to face extreme forms of humiliation and violence. The sheer social and economic marginality as well as their dependence on the upper-caste Naidus, has failed to provide the space for the Arunthathiyar youth to abandon the practice. They could only exhibit degrees of ambivalence towards the practice. This is reinforced by their need to differentiate themselves from the Paraïyars and their dependency on the Naidus. These are accounts of gender being predominantly mobilised as a trope to reinforce and redefine caste identities in the context of rural change.

Third, the rights discourse of the women’s organisation, in the changing context of internationalisation of the rights discourse, attempts to frame the Mathamma question as one of “individual injury”, cultural oppression, and human rights violations. It has hardly addressed the issue of the structural violence, including the state’s failure to extend the development schemes to the most disadvantaged communities, such as the Arunthathiyars. In such articulation of rights, there appears to be very little recognition of a different conception of “rights”. The women’s organisation’s discourse on the Mathammas’ rights is thus, to borrow the terms from Lila Abu-Lughod, “regulatory and emancipatory”.

The transformative aspects of such discourse are that these impoverished and culturally constrained women are trained to lobby with the state, bargain with their community, articulate their problems and constitute their particular interests. It is regulatory in the sense that the women’s organisations restrict the space for emancipatory politics by constructing the Mathammas only as sexual subjects exploited by cultural traditions. Their rights and needs are envisaged only within this space. The Mathamma issue is, by and large, not represented as a problem of caste subservience and dependency. However, the Mathammas themselves claim their lowest caste identity and the associated exploitation as part of their gendered experiences. In other words, in the discourse of the women’s organisation, the cultural dynamism of caste hierarchies and its relation to women’s subordination are marginalised. One needs to bear in mind here that the initial strategy of the campaign against the practice by the women’s organisation through the use of the media was an attempt to construct the practice as a legal anomaly or as an abnormality within the Arunthathiyar caste (without taking into account the fact that caste power is relational).

Finally, the media and the state intervened in this practice only to criminalise the Arunthathiyar men and blame the Mathammas for “sexual promiscuity”. The moral overtones of these institutions cannot be overlooked as they also interpret the non-marital family arrangements such as that of the Mathammas as “sex-work”. They too let the dominant castes out of their purview. For both, the women’s organisations which are keen on providing welfare to the Mathammas and the Arunthathiyars who want to liberate themselves from the caste-based agrarian bondage, the welfare state has emerged as a key arbiter. In the process, the state has not only “emasculated” the community of men, but has become what Wendy Brown terms as “agents of sex equality or female protection”.

Circumscribed by these discourses and by the efforts of the Arunthathiyars to modify the practice mainly to accommodate the caste and state interests, the Mathammas seem to have very little control over their lives. Their gendered marginality and exploitation is, thus, a product of the intersection between patriarchy of the upper castes and the Arunthathiyar men, economic vulnerability (which is a product of their caste location as well), and the discourses of women’s activism and the state that are informed by legality and “morality”.

NOTES
1 These Tamil months roughly correspond to the month of May-June.
2 For a detailed review of feminist scholarship on caste and patriarchy, see V Geetha, *Patriarchy*, (Calcutta: Stree 2007).
6 Valluvapuram is the pseudonym for the study village. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms are used for persons cited in this paper.
7 Though there are no school dropouts among the Arunthathiyars in Valluvapuram village, only in the last two years young boys have entered higher education. However, girls are not permitted to travel to access such education. Early marriage is widely prevalent and young women too work as wage labourers, rear cattle and work as domestic helps for the Naidus. At the time of the fieldwork, only three young women have taken up the “company work”. This is in sharp contrast to the Paraïyar families where 50 to 60% of young girls and boys work in the companies.
8 Interview with Angamma, Valluvapuram, July 2010.
9 Interview with Pullamma, 12 July 2010.
10 For a nuanced understanding of the ritual as communication in recovering subjectivity and identity and the role of ritual in reconstituting power relations, see Akio Tanabe, “The Transformation of Sakti: Gender and Sexuality in the Festival of Goddess Ramachandi”, *Sente Ethnological Studies*, No 50, 1999.
11 For the details of Mariamma worship by the Paraïyars and their experience with this ritual, see Vinayam, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, *Vinayam: Life of Dalit (London: Verso)*, 1997, pp 105-14.
12 Paul Younger, “A Temple Festival of Mariyamman”, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol XLVIII, No 4, 1980. One needs to acknowledge here that the story of Mariamma or even Mathammas is not just derivative from the mainstream Hindu scriptures but are oral reinterpretations of the written tradition. It thus accommodates critique of hierarchies and offers alternative moral discourses.
13 For details of various legends and worship of Amman among the Arunthathiyars in southern Tamil Nadu, see, Marku, *Arunthathiyar Vazhum V aralaru* (“The History of Arunthathiyars’ Lives”), (Palayamkottai: Folklore Research and Research Centre, St Xavier’s College, 2001), pp 150-53.
16 While discussing the Chamars’ interpretation of Suyanarayana Katha, Manuela Ciotti observes that though the Katha is from the written tradition of the Hindu scripture, the oral tradition rendered by the Chamars emerged as a powerful critique of brahminism and constituted the brahmans as immoral and inauspicious which are attributes otherwise attributed to the Chamars. See Manuela Ciotti, *Retro-modern India: Forging the Low-Caste Self* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010).
17 During the interview with the Valluvapuram Naidu women and men, they spoke of the power of the Mathamma goddess and their obligations to worship the goddess.
18 Interview with Naidu women, Vijayakumari (48 years old) and Dhanammal (90 years old), 12 December 2010.
19 In recent years such Kappu control have been
relaxed since the young Arunthathiyars work for companies in night shift and also commute for work outside the village. In other words, with increasing dependency on non-farm employment, such local customs had to undergo some modifications to accommodate new forms of survival and time discipline. However, the rituals are not totally given up since they provide self-identity and a moral claim for the oppressed to challenge the continuing caste inequalities.

20 Interview with Devi, 14 September 2010.

21 According to the survey of the Society for Rural Education and Development (SRED) in both these districts there are about 59 Mathammas living in 22 villages and 16 of them live in Valluvapuram. Another NGO report states that the Mathamma temple is in 75 villages of these districts. The Tamil Nadu state officials, however, deny the existence of the practice. See Centre for Child Rights and Development, “Girl Children Offered to Village Deity ‘Mathamma’: A Brief Study of the Practice of Offering Girl Children to Village Deity ‘Mathamma’ Leading to Sexual Exploitation Prevalent in Thiruvallur and Vellore Districts of Tamil Nadu – India” (Chennai, Centre for Child Rights and Development 2003).

22 The SRED was founded in 1979 by Fatima Burnard, a well-known dalit woman activist, and the organization is based in Arakonam in Vellore district. While it has been actively taking up issues of violence against dalit women, in recent years it has focused its attention on building dalit women’s leadership at various levels. Over the years, the SRED has facilitated several movements among the rural dalits especially in the three districts of Kancheepuram, Vellore, and Thiruvallur. Significant among them is the Rural Women’s Liberation Movement (RWLM) started in 1983 under the leadership of dalit women which is now actively intervening in development projects, offering critiques of the state development programmes and focusing on mobilising women against globalisation. It is through the special focus on dalit women’s rights and leadership, the SRED and its movements have developed a nuanced critique of caste and dalit patriarchy.

23 For a detailed study on the devadasi practice or “sacred prostitution” among the outcastes in Andra Pradesh, see Priyadarsini Vijaysri, Re-casting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India (Delhi: Kanishka, 2004).

24 Of the 126 families of Paraiyars, 37 have tiled graves for the dominant and other castes. Isa- belle Clark-Decés observes that in Villupuram district, the Paraiyar youth movement in 75 villages of these districts. The Tamil Nadu state officials, however, deny the existence of the practice. See Centre for Child Rights and Development, “Girl Children Offered to Village Deity ‘Mathamma’: A Brief Study of the Practice of Offering Girl Children to Village Deity ‘Mathamma’ Leading to Sexual Exploitation Prevalent in Thiruvallur and Vellore Districts of Tamil Nadu – India” (Chennai, Centre for Child Rights and Development 2003).

25 Again this refusal to carry out caste-based work by the Paraiyars is not unique to Vallu- vapuram village. Isabelle Clark-Decés observes that in Villupuram district, the Paraiyar youth refused to carry on the elder’s chores such as playing of drums at the funerals and digging of graves for the dominant and other castes. Isabelle Clark-Decés, “How Dalits Have Changed the Mood at Hindu Funerals: A View from South India”, International Journal of Hindu Studies, Vol 10, No 3, 2006.

26 In 2005, the Arunthathiyar youths formed the Arunthathiyar Viduthalai Munnani (Arunthathiyar Liberation Front) which has about hundred active members. The forum which aims to improve the status of Arunthathiyars as equal to the Paraiyars is in the forefront of struggles to get the welfare schemes for the Arunthathiyars. It also networks with other Arunthathiyar collectives in Tamil Nadu to get state benefits such as reservation for Arunthathiyars, housing schemes and so on.

27 An Arunthathiyar youth provided a recent instance of how 40 applications of Arunthathiyars for old-age pension had been overlooked by the district revenue officer while the same had been provided to the colony Paraiyars and Oor Naidu.

28 In our focus group discussion with the Paraiyar youths, both the young men and women often mentioned Arunthathiyars as “Negeriyan Thiriyathavargal” (those who are ignorant of being modern).

29 The pamphlet is titled, Mathamma Kurumpadam: Leena Manimekalayan Moosalayum, SRED Kattandiyavannagham (Mathamma Documentary: The Treachery of Leena Manimekalai and SRED Fatima’s Cunning Deceit).


31 During our first visit to the Arunthathiyar colony in Valluvapuram, the youths strongly resisted our entry as they identified us with the SRED which was perceived to be publicising the Mathamma practice and thus humiliating the Arunthathiyars. Some of them strongly felt that the media has tried to portray the community as criminals as the devadasi custom has been actively involving and working for dalit women’s rights and leadership, the SRED and its movements have developed a nuanced critique of caste and dalit patriarchy.

32 Reflecting on this Fatima Burnard critically observes, “The dalit movement with patriarchal norms started publicly attacking leaders from TNDWM [Tamil Nadu Dalit Women’s Movement] ‘individually’. They are accused through wall posters, public meetings and black mailings. TNDWM faced harassment confronting the caste and patriarchal nature of the communities which is also influenced by Hindutva ideology.” See Burnard Fatima, “Facing Dispar: Struggles and Challenges of Dalit Women”. Tamil Nadu Women’s Forum, Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, nd, http://blhri.org/blhri_e/other/report1.html

33 Two Mathammas provided us details of their income from dancing during the festival months (only three months) as surpassing their daily income from agricultural wage or from any other manual labour. During the festival, those who dance earn up to Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 per day for about a week or 10 days in each village.

34 The Mathamma has been denied separate ration card as they did not have independent housing and are dependent either on their brothers or fathers. Without a ration card, they can neither access loans under SHG scheme nor could they get access to free housing.


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