



## South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal

19 | 2018

Caste-Gender Intersections in Contemporary India

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4578>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.4578

ISSN: 1960-6060

### Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

### Electronic reference

Nandini Hebbar N., « Subjectivities of Suitability: 'Intimate Aspirations' in an Engineering College », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 19 | 2018, Online since 07 June 2018, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4578> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.4578

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Recent episodes of violence in Tamil Nadu, especially the persecution of couples in inter-caste marriages, underscore the burgeoning caste consciousness in the region.<sup>2</sup> While the mainstream media has viewed these incidents as regressive attempts to secure "caste purity," one must pay greater attention to the contemporary moment in which such a consciousness has surged, and the contingent ways in which caste endogamy is enforced (Abraham 2014). In the context of western Tamil Nadu, the political discourse accompanying these episodes has revealed the widespread anxiety surrounding patterns of youth sociality that have emerged in tandem with the upward mobility of Dalit groups, as well as young women's increased access to higher education and employment.<sup>3</sup> As the targeting of Dalit engineering college students shows,<sup>4</sup> these anxieties are particularly centered around sites of youth sociality such as private engineering colleges, which have seen unparalleled growth in the region and appear as gateways of mobility in the social imaginary of different groups.<sup>5</sup>
- 2 While it is difficult to miss the visibility granted to private engineering colleges across the landscape of Tamil Nadu, it must also be noted that anxieties are also spatialized on campuses: gender segregation is widely practiced in a majority of the state's 500-odd engineering colleges, some of which forbid all forms of cross-sex interaction. Many of them have incorporated features of gender segregation into their architectural design in the form of segregated staircases, canteens, corridors, and enforce it on college buses and campus pathways. Students are subject to surveillance by teaching and non-teaching staff, and technology keeps parents up-to-date about students' presence/absence in the college on a day-to-day basis. Students are also mandated to follow a dress code that

emphasizes appearing “desexualized” while in college: students who do not follow this code,<sup>6</sup> or are observed engaging in “undesirable” behavior such as being close or intimate with a friend or classmate of the opposite sex are called in for “counseling” during an hour specially set aside for that purpose every week. The private college, therefore, emerges as a quasi-parental body that infantilizes students and disciplines them in accordance with gendered social norms. The teaching and non-teaching staff, who perform these functions, characterize their responsibilities as a form of “affective labor,” not unlike what parents perform for their children, keeping them focused on their studies and away from “distractions.” In other words, parents and college authorities operate on the premise that young people, far from home and the protection of kin, are exposed to a wider world of dangerous choices, including those involved in choosing a future life partner.

- 3 In this paper, I attempt to capture the processes of “*love pandrudu*” (“doing love”) in such a context—an engineering college campus in western Tamil Nadu. Taking my cue from my respondents’ Tamil-English phrase that casts heterosexual college relationships as a process of doing, of constructing—an active project rather a state of being—I view “doing love” as an important analytical frame to capture the negotiations and strategies that characterize the lived experience of love<sup>7</sup> among young people in the college. By adopting this as a chief frame of enquiry, I attempt to fulfill two objectives: one, to document the processes by which “caste patriarchy” is institutionalized in the spaces of technical education, and two, to contribute ethnographic material on the lived experience of intimate relationships. I argue that the “doing” of love not only reveals how colleges emerge as a site of romantic experimentation and sexual initiation within youth life-worlds, but also as a site of adjustment to various constraints regarding the choice of a partner: those imposed by parents, families, college authorities, peers, caste and community. The choices made comply with projects of status enhancement for one’s self and one’s family, as caste groups attempt to secure social mobility through endogamy enforcement and marriage practices—a form of “caste patriarchy.”
- 4 This, of course, does not mean that there is a lack of emotion or feeling in intimate relationships: the event of falling in love is a very important one that, in my observation, marked lives and is inscribed within biographies in different ways. It brought about changes in states of mind, habit (*parakam*), and feelings of attachment (*paasam*).<sup>8</sup> Young women visibly craved the company of their partners, and attempted to cultivate a companionate intimacy, waiting for them to text or call, shedding tears when they argued or quarreled. Falling in love also inaugurated a set of “intimate aspirations” as young women strategized about marital unions with their partners by trying to achieve economic independence, status and power for themselves to combat the enforcement of *jati* endogamy in lieu of middle-caste/class endogamy. Rather than being focused on the success or failure of these arrangements, I am interested in the ideology that lies behind such aspirations and desires.
- 5 In order to give some conceptual depth to the way I look at my respondents’ desires and hopes, I use the term “intimate aspirations”—a term I borrow from Veena Das’ (2010) essay on love and everyday life. Ethnographically, Das uses this term to frame the efforts made by two families in a neighborhood in East Delhi to accommodate a Hindu-Muslim marriage—despite its explosive potential/political affect. In the study, Das captures the play of uncertainty, doubt, morality, skepticism and the gradual deepening of relations as the family strives to achieve their “intimate aspirations.” Philosophically, she emphasizes

it as a process of Foucauldian “eventalization”—gestures, acts and discourses that interrupt the rigid line of causal thinking or what we think of as a constant, or a rule. For me, Das’ prism of viewing love as a methodical adjustment and re-imagination becomes a useful framework for looking at the shifting terrain that my respondents deemed “suitable,” reflecting the hope, negotiation and strategy in the way young people “do love” in the college I investigated. I conceptualize their actions and strategies in the face of dire political affect as similar interruptions of the moral frameworks or “rules” thrust on them from various quarters, with resistance and conformity becoming part of the process of realizing their “intimate aspirations.”

## Field-site and methodology

- 6 An engineering college, as a site of both youth sociality and status enhancement, is a particularly rich ethnographic site for the subject under consideration. This paper is part of a larger ethnographic study conducted in a privately-owned engineering college in Salem district, western Tamil Nadu. The Chinna College of Technology (CCT)<sup>9</sup> is owned and managed by a family belonging to a non-Brahmin mercantile caste group, and named after the founder. The college is a private autonomous college affiliated with Anna University, Chennai—however, as per government regulations, 65 percent of all seats are set aside as “government quota” and the other 35 percent is retained to be filled at their discretion. The college was set up in 1997 as part of the patronage activity of the founder, an industrialist and an “institutional big man.”<sup>10</sup> Since the death of the founder, the college has been run by male members of the founder’s agnate kin, and continues to be enmeshed in family networks and client-patron relationships.
- 7 After securing the requisite permissions from the college management and Principal, I stayed in the women’s hostel named after the founder’s wife, for a 10-month period in 2014, attending classes and shadowing my respondents, aged 18 to 21, as a participant observer.<sup>11</sup> I followed up on what I observed through open-ended interviews with my student-respondents in informal settings, and interviewed teachers and members of the management in more formalized settings such as their offices. The students at the college (totaling about 4,000) came from various caste, class and ethnic backgrounds, though the bulk (about 60 percent) were from Backward Class (BC) groups in Tamil Nadu. The student body also included young men and women from the other South Indian states, South Asian countries such as Nepal and Bhutan, and African countries such as Somalia and Sudan, who are lured to Tamil Nadu for an engineering degree from the reputed Anna University with which CCT is affiliated. Although an engineering education is expensive and colleges are known to charge high “management fees,” students of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and those who aspire to be the very first graduates of their families can take advantage of sops, including Free Education in private engineering colleges as part of State schemes. Therefore, students come from various social strata, ranging from those who can pay the illegal capitation fees and those who would not have been able to access engineering education without government schemes and bank loans. In this sense, the caste and class composition of the student body bears little semblance to the campus described by Ajantha Subramanian (2015a, 2015b) in her work on the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras, even though both are institutions of technical education in Tamil Nadu. Unlike the elite “pedigreed” upper caste students at IIT-M, gearing for transnational careers that come with lucrative pay packets, the student body at CCT is not

even confident they will secure jobs at the end of the engineering program. Students at CCT typically spent four years of their engineering program working on their English, improving their “employability,” and focusing on consolidating a “decent,” urban middle-class identity for themselves.

- 8 Apart from a handful of colleges owned by Brahmins and set up as a part of the backlash against the Anti-Brahmin movement that negatively discriminated against the Brahmins in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of private colleges are owned by non-Brahmin groups, and set up beginning in the late 1980s. There have been colleges set up by industrialists, caste associations, and politicians; others are part of “education empires.”<sup>12</sup> With private ownership and a retreating State, private engineering colleges have emerged as extensions of family/caste networks—as opposed to liberal arts or missionary-run colleges in Tamil Nadu, which have been theorized as externalized spaces, located outside adult/caste society (cf. Osella and Osella 1998; Nakassis 2010). These campuses are best visualized as folding back into community life and caste society, disciplining and shaping sexual subjectivities of students in accordance with family and caste ideologies. Even when they are not run by ideological organizations such as caste associations, the disciplinary apparatuses in college have emerged as Unique Selling Points (USP) according to a neoliberal logic that casts parents as “stakeholders” or “customers” of the college. It enables upwardly mobile parents to enroll their children in a professional college and enhance/consolidate their status without running the risk of ruining their respectability.
- 9 Because of the strict gender segregation targeted at minimizing the “risk” of romantic entanglements among the students, at the college, I was able to interact and spend time as a participant observer mainly with young women. Although I conducted interviews with several young men, my insights into their perspectives remain limited. My stay in the women’s hostel, however, gave me rich insight into young women’s lives. In response to the question on what I, as an ethnographer, should study about them, I was always told “love life” or “relationships,” amidst much giggling. I meant this question as an ice breaker, and my informants’ responses were also meant to test the waters. The fact that I looked interested rather than intolerant of such responses cast me as an empathetic figure, given the wider disciplinary stance of the college authorities regarding gender segregation. I am sure that my own age at that time (26–27) and my status as an unmarried female student, who was not from Tamil Nadu, also helped my cause.<sup>13</sup>
- 10 Despite the restrictions posed, everyday life, especially in the college women’s hostel in which I lived, was suffused with the language and performance of heterosexual desire. Thus, it was not uncommon to see young women teasing each other about boyfriends, or claiming to be intensely “sighting” (infatuated with) someone. Students’ intimate relationships involved hours of mobile-phone texting, and arranging to meet “by chance” in the canteen or on the way to class. When young couples met in private, it was usually in secrecy at the park, or a fast food joint across the street from the college that had a dark mezzanine floor with booth seating, specifically targeting couples who could afford to pay for a bit of privacy.
- 11 Despite a certain degree of freedom exercised in the semi-private premises of the hostel, peers, family, college authorities and caste/community continued to hold sway over how social relations were organized in the college. Time and again, “scandals” rocked the campus when young women eloped from the hostel; such events were inevitably followed by tighter regulation over hostel life. These “scandals” also served as fodder for evening

tabloids fanning “moral panics” (Cohen 1972) trumpeting the need for greater discipline in colleges such as CCT where cross-sex interactions were not completely restricted. As the college mainly catered to a few districts in western Tamil Nadu, it was not unknown to have cousins, relatives, acquaintances and “family friends” within the student body. Informal caste networks also existed: they were the channels through which caste literature circulated amongst the students and also the networks through which young women’s activities were policed.

- 12 The same respondents who urged me to place “love” as the object of research also said that they were not interested in contracting a “love marriage,” and that they trusted their kin to do what was right for them. This was interpreted as a sign of filial duty, a way of paying back their parents for the “suffering” they had gone through to bring them up well and invest in their education. “Love,” however, was fetishized as an essential part of college life, both in lived experience and as represented in popular culture. However, in both popular culture as in lived experience, inter-caste marriages especially with Dalits were largely perceived to be inconceivable, were stigmatized and often greeted with violence (Damodaran 2013). As described above, in 2013–14, the region in which the college is located had also been the site of well-publicized Dalit murders, termed *aanava kolai* (“insolence murders”), that had negatively politicized inter-caste marriage and sociality among college-going students.<sup>14</sup> The students spoke of such cases frequently, and they were offered up as instructive fables and even animated the “ghost story” exchanges in the hostel rooms at night, when students lay chatting before falling asleep. According to the accounts supplied by my respondents, caste networks and associations were part of college life: not only did these “pressure groups” have some say in whether young women of the community accessed professional higher education, loose networks of caste existed within the college to ensure proper behavior by caste members within the college walls, as well as organize campaigns to “build awareness” among young women of the dangers of marrying outside their caste by distributing pamphlets outside engineering colleges and making students take oaths not to marry outside their community (Ananth 2012).
- 13 Thus, caste was extensively discussed vis-à-vis marriage and relationships in what was otherwise a general policy of “caste blindness” in the college—I did not meet a single student who claimed to be discriminated against within the college based on their caste status,<sup>15</sup> and students seemed to form friendships across caste lines, without reservations. The college authorities also had a firm policy when it came to following a “caste blind” attitude in the classroom. I was specifically asked by the college authorities not to directly ask anyone’s *jati* identity or reveal it to other students should I, by chance, come to know of anyone’s identity. Such instances could cause friction between the students, I was told. On the other hand, I was also told that students were used to being referred to by the State-administrative categories such as OBC (Other Backward Caste), Most Backward Caste (MBC), Scheduled Caste (SC), and I was free to use these terms in my conversations for the purposes of my research. This peculiar paradox alludes to a larger issue persistent all over the country—fallout from the conflicting policies followed by the State regarding social justice and “caste blindness” (Deshpande 2013). However, unlike Subramanian’s (2015a; 2015b) work on IIT-Madras, which reveals how a policy of “caste blindness” had enabled the mobilization of a discourse of “merit” in spaces such as IITs, caste in CCT emerged chiefly in gendered ways that can be broadly referred to as forms of “caste patriarchy” as the following ethnographic section reveals.

## Caste, gender and intimate relationships: locating the study

- 14 Discourses of sexual regulation are instrumental in the reproduction of caste and its sexual economy which prohibits all men from viewing all women as potential sexual partners, but gives upper caste men the right to “enjoy” Dalit and lower-caste women (Rege 2003; Geetha 2007; Rao 2009). Therefore, while liaisons between upper caste men and lower caste women are normalized, relationships that reverse this equation are subject to opposition and brutal violence. In recent years, Prem Chowdhry (2007; 2009) documents cases of Dalit and dominant/upper caste members’ elopement and marriage that call down the ire of caste associations and groups in Haryana. These cases are turned into a public spectacle by the dominant caste groups, and emerge as a rallying point for wider collective support, cutting across class and age divides. This is summed up in statements such as “First Our Jobs, then Our Girls,” (Chowdhry 2009), which draw attention not only to inter-caste marriage but also to the rivalries in education and employment between caste groups. Anupama Rao (2009) has argued that such rhetoric and violence indicate the “invisible consequence” (p. 189) of Dalit political awareness and mobilization, where the desire for upward social mobility has been recast as a desire for sexual access to upper caste women in a bid to consolidate Dalit masculinity (Rao 2009:189). She argues, “violation of Dalit women and the violent disciplining of Dalit men are two sides of the same coin” in which violence functions as a “pedagogic tool” meant to restore a particular kind of social order (p. 190). The State is usually complicit in such campaigns, as legal machinery is often used to locate runaway couples; charges of rape and abduction against the male partners are also common (Chowdhry 2007; Mody 2008; Baxi 2014).
- 15 While Indian feminist scholarship has paid great attention to episodes of violence targeted at the enforcement of endogamy, emphasizing the processes through which caste is gendered (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1991; Chakravarti 1993; Rege 2003; Geetha 2007; Rao 2009; Abraham 2014), much less has been said about the subtle forms of caste patriarchy. There has been little focus on spaces of youth sociality like colleges, for instance, even though most caste and gender scholars would accept the basic Ambedkarite premise that caste is a system of graded inequalities, and that the control of women’s sexuality is important for a group’s social mobility (Ambedkar [1906] 2013). However, little effort has been made to map actual lived experiences of the ways social mobility becomes entrenched in the ordinary and everyday vocabularies of love and desire among young people, and in the interstices of caste and gender in which the meanings of such relationships are negotiated.
- 16 The discussion of my field-site is crucial in filling that gap, and documents the insecurities surrounding youth sexuality and sociality embedded in spaces of investment in social mobility such as engineering colleges. The question of how young women negotiate or comply with these restrictions to fulfill their desires in such spaces naturally flows from this discussion. This too, has remained a crucial gap in anthropological studies, which have tended to favor marriage as an object of study, rather than more generalized notions such as love and intimacy in heterosexual relationships.

- 17 This study can therefore be located among the sparse literature on youth relationships in South Asia: among them, Osella and Osella (1998) show the non-hierarchical possibilities involved in flirting, *tuning* and *line* relationships among youth in Kerala, while Leena Abraham (2002) studies youth relationships in a college in Mumbai highlighting a typology of cross-sex relationships as either “*bhai-behen*” (brother-sister), “true love” or “timepass.” Both show fascinating accounts of the playful aspects of youth relationships. A few studies have attempted to study youth romances in college as complex, messy affairs that negotiate caste identities (Lukose 2009), sometimes resulting in harassment and conflict (Rogers 2008), but do not explore marriage strategies specifically. Pre-marital relationships, entered into by choice and involving marriage negotiations and strategies remain less studied, although a recent paper by Parul Bhandari (2017) shows the liminal nature of these relationships and the ways in which they are negotiated within the moral frameworks of the family. My work hopes to extend her work, although rather than the term “pre-marital relationships,” I simply use the term “intimate relationships” or “college relationships” to avoid making marriage into a compulsory reference point. On an ethnographic level, I deal not only with family but also college authorities, peers and caste/community networks—all of whom exist as multiple moral frameworks within the college. Each of the following sections are dedicated to showing how the presence of these forces “disciplined” desires and choices, and functioned as reference points in the crafting of what my respondents thought of as “suitable.” These factors, I argue, played an important role in my respondents’ “intimate aspirations.”
- 18 My tentative thesis can be located in the insightful studies connecting love to aspirations and social change—however unlike the Nepal context, in which Laura Ahearn (2001) sees a correlation between literacy, love-letter writing and the idea of “development” as embedded in love marriage, the view one gets from my field site is different. While the idea of choice and individualism has a role to play in setting up a romantic ideal, the discourses present in this paper reveal that it is kin networks and kin support that enable aspiration and mobility, and young people show great reluctance to completely sever that link for the sake of a love marriage, coupledness and choice. Young people, therefore, spoke of strategies to “convince parents” and get them to accept the relationship rather than of a runaway marriage and the severance of ties. While spoken of as love between parent and child, this discourse also reveals the difficult circumstances in which upward mobility has been secured for the family and the inherent realization that kin networks are required for success in future careers in the neoliberal regime. Such findings also corroborate studies of marriage among professional engineers in the software industry (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Baas 2009).

## Continuities between home and college

- 19 When students returned to CCT after a month-long summer vacation to begin a fresh academic year in July 2014, there was a buzz that regulations over student conduct would be made stricter that year. It was not clear how these rumors and whispers began, but there was conjecture that it was because a young woman had gone to stay with a young man during the vacation instead of going home. According to the gossip, not only had a few teachers and the Principal “raided” the place, the young woman’s parents were informed and it became a huge scandal at the college. Her parents took her away, and she did not return to college again. The widely-held view was that she would never return to



college as she was under “*house arrest*”—a term used in the college to refer to the “punishment” meted out at home to those—usually the young women—who were caught having romantic relationships. This involved a total ban on outings, including school or college, and usually, no access to the phone or internet. During “*house arrest*,” young women were under severe pressure to break up with their boyfriends, and promise never to contact them again, or enter another relationship by choice. Sometimes, they underwent severe assault, both physical and verbal, from family members, and were immediately married off to another man (usually an uncle or cross cousin) in a bid to save their reputation and the family’s respectability. Opposition to such relationships is informed by the “shame” resulting from the public display of female sexuality, and notions that young women, influenced by new visibilities and new mobilities, are moving marriage from the realm of caste and kinship to a place which Perveen Mody (2008), in her study on love-marriage in Delhi, calls “not community”—a liminal space without social relations and bonds.<sup>16</sup> In the context of the college, opposition to such relationships stems from the idea that such choices go against the grain of status consolidation and enhancement that an arranged marriage could achieve, at least in theory.

- 20 College life as a site of such mobilities and visibilities came especially under the microscope as I have already explained above. These anxieties and events had embedded themselves in the everyday and even seemed ordinary, appearing as a necessary condition to women’s entry into college space. For instance, when I was conducting participant observation research in the third-year Mechanical Class, the students noticed that their classmate Jothi had not come to class when college reopened after the summer vacation; they started making enquiries about her among her close friends: “has she been caught having a boyfriend or has her marriage been fixed?” they asked, rather than more generalized enquiries about her wellbeing. After a while, her teachers also joined in such enquiries, highlighting how common such incidents were.
- 21 Meanwhile, her friends shared how Jothi had indeed been compelled to stay home because her father suspected she was in a relationship. Her *athai* (father’s sister) had alleged so, after Jothi turned down an alliance to marry her son. This allegation, in turn, had upset her father. As Jothi’s *athaipaiyye* (father’s sister son/cross cousin), Dinesh was considered a preferred match, and approached his mother about his desire to marry Jothi. Jothi had done the unthinkable by refusing the match and her family had concluded that she would have done so only because she had a boyfriend tucked away somewhere, perhaps at college. To add fuel to the fire, various family members had noticed that she spent extended periods of time texting and chatting on her phone late into the night.
- 22 After being under “*house arrest*” for two weeks, Jothi voluntarily surrendered her mobile phone to her father to gain his trust. After this, her father allowed her to return to college, even though she had to comply with other rules—such as returning home immediately after class hours—and was forbidden from participating in all extracurricular activities. This event at her home punctuated her everyday interactions in college, as she excused herself from college activities and events telling everyone, “*veetlai prachnai irrukku*” (there is trouble at home), an excuse that was readily treated as valid by her teachers and classmates, without any further explanations throughout the semester.

## Caste and kin in everyday college life

- 23 Given the atmosphere of tension, suitable young men who were distant relatives or family acquaintances were sometimes seen as the ideal option to contract a choice relationship, without having to run the risk of family opposition. This is also in line with cross-cousin marriage as a “romantic ideal” in the Tamil context (Trawick 1990). Generally referred to as marriageable cross cousin (*athai-paiyye/mama-paiyye*) even when not related as such, these relations functioned as shorthand to craft desirable subjectivities in potential partners. As Nidhi, one of my close informants who was in such a relationship herself summarized—“such relationships are ideal, and sure to be accepted,” even though her own relationship with Ananth, an engineering student from another college, had encountered less-than-enthusiastic responses at her home. “Their only problem is that we never consulted them and decided everything ourselves,” she said. “There will be joy all around at our wedding,” she beamed confidently.
- 24 Even though Nidhi referred to him as a cross cousin (*mama-paiyye*), Ananth was not biologically related to her, and was a distant relative by marriage. However, as the families were close, Nidhi and Ananth had grown up playing together, meeting at family functions, etc. Ananth had proposed to her at one such family function and she had accepted. They had been together for three years, and their respective families knew about their relationship, although not through a voluntary disclosure by the young couple. They had been “caught”—Nidhi’s mother had found a picture of them together at a hill station, and confronted Nidhi. Ananth’s arms were wrapped around her, and her head seemed to be resting on his chest, as he loomed a whole foot above her. Flabbergasted at the sight of the picture in her mother’s hands, and not knowing what to say, Nidhi had blabbered an excuse about it being “photoshopped,” and hurriedly called Ananth. Ananth had advised her to come clean, and Nidhi had sat her mother down and admitted everything. Her mother had wept: “Is it right what you have done?” she had asked her. Nidhi, however, had told them Ananth was suitable in every way, and they might have arranged the marriage themselves. “Do not worry, we are never going to run away,” she had reassured them.
- 25 Such relationships with relatives, which were discussed ubiquitously in young women’s narratives, presented a way for young people to enjoy companionate relationships with partners their respective families and kin would consider suitable. In Nidhi’s account, Ananth had supported her through thick and thin—“I call him all the time, whenever I need to speak to someone. He knows me in a way that no one else knows me as we grew up playing together. The only problem is that he is in a very strict engineering college in Chennai. He cannot have his mobile with him always. But he comes to meet me often.” Her friends, who were present during the conversation, readily agreed with this, “You should have seen it, Nandini. The way he carried her after she fell and sprained her foot. We had all gone out, and he had come to meet her. He did not worry about anything—what people will say, nothing. *Appadiye* (Just like that)—” they said, mimicking him carrying her in his arms, while Nidhi blushed. “His expression said it all. It was like a movie.”
- 26 The prospect of such desirable marriage also carried a flip side: as mentioned above, many young women feared surveillance by fellow students who were relatives, or from the same community or village. Such networks, which mainly relied on young men in the

college, kept tabs on young women's behavior, activities and friendships, promoting a notion of collective ownership over what they defined as "our women."

- 27 Suriya, the daughter of a rich well-known Gounder contractor in the city was very resentful that one of her classmates of the same community (not a relative) was very close to her parents. The young man visited their home often, and passed on detailed reports on her behavior at college to her mother. Manikandan was not in the same class, but often visited her class to talk to some of his friends, making Suriya nervous. She said it was a ruse he used to keep an eye on her. Whenever she caught sight of Manikandan, she strategized to move away and visit her friends in the other class, visit the rest room, etc. Suriya's classmate and friend Devanai, also from the same community, explained to me that such surveillance was common and expected because Suriya was the only daughter of the contractor. Manikandan, himself a budding civil engineer, had a lot to benefit from keeping Suriya under surveillance. In the process, he not only earned the trust of a reputed contractor and a pillar of the Gounder community, the same gave him—an unmarried student—a sense of importance from being aligned with dominant masculinity. Suriya said that Manikandan had filled a void that her parents had begun to feel not only because of the lack of a son, but also because they had a daughter who was not at all interested in her father's business and saw her as a "rebel." "My father forced me to take Civil Engineering but this is what I really want to do," she said one day, showing me a portfolio of fashion designs she had diligently maintained. The book not only featured beautiful sketches of her designs, but also swatches and details of embellishments to be used in each design. While I marveled at her work, she described her dream to study fashion design in Australia and "get away from all this!"
- 28 Those in intimate relationships furtively hid them from such networks in fear that they would be reported to their families, caste elders and associations. There were also cases in which such surveillance over classmates and notions of ownership could turn into brawls in the college corridors, between young men. Young men often said that "without women, we would never fight." While this may be attributed to adolescent hyperbole, it also shows the deep-seated gendered views of conflict. Moreover, I cannot capture in words the fear and dread such surveillance produced in some young women—who constantly seemed to be on edge and looking over their shoulders. Such techniques of routinized surveillance went hand in hand with other technocratic solutions used by the college to keep parents informed of students' day-to-day movements.
- 29 College life and the youth-life worlds therein, are significantly influenced and shaped by caste and kin, even if students are physically located outside the home. However, I do not mean to suggest that such ideologies and the exercise of their power are totalitarian and absolute. Even in these circumstances, young men and women give vent to their desires and negotiate intimate relationships of choice in college. While many such relationships were contracted over caste and religious lines and were not likely to get parental approval, partners in almost all the relationships I came across had marriage as their stated goal. Critically speaking, this also demonstrates how the expression of marriage aspirations lent a veneer of respectability to a relationship casting desire as legitimate, as "true love." More liminal relationships expressed as "*timepass*" were carried out more surreptitiously, hidden even from the closest of friends. Despite a culture of discussing matters related to sexuality in peer groups (termed simply as "*matter*"), it was widely asserted that the proper place for sex was in marriage, with the blessing of kin. Moreover, a closer look at young women's choices also showed the ways in which they were

inflected by what is traditionally mandated in terms of status (*getththu*), if not *jati*. These choices are generally expressed along with the trope of “convincing parents”—indicating hope for gradual shifts in the way parents would perceive such choice relationships, even if opposed at first, and a reconciliation to the conflict between duty and desire.

## Crafting suitability: legitimizing strategies

- 30 The hope that parents and kin would accept the relationship, I would argue, emerged from young women’s crafting of suitable subjectivities within their desired partnerships i.e., consciously portraying a relationship or individual in a desirable light. Whenever I asked young women how they would “convince” their parents, they almost always highlighted what I came to think of as the “trump card”—a certain feature as being extraordinary and therefore requiring exceptional treatment. As opposed to a Western romantic ideal of a couple’s character traits, likes and dislikes being called upon to justify compatibility (Hirsch and Waldrow 2003), my respondents highlighted educational achievements, profession or administrative categories of caste to craft a desirable subjectivity and show status (*getththu kamikarudu*).
- 31 For instance, Aiswarya was in a choice relationship for a year with a young man who had graduated from the MBA program at the same college. Her parents did not know of the relationship yet, and Rahul had pursued her persistently for six months, during which they had played it as a liminal relationship, chatting for hours over the phone, before she said she reciprocated his feelings. When I asked her whether her parents would approve of the match, she said she was optimistic as the young man was two years her senior and after graduating from his MBA program had found a job at a private investment firm. She said she would be able to emphasize that fact, and convince her parents that he would be able to take good care of her.
- 32 However, it was not as if Aiswarya had not considered the question of caste, which she said could hypothetically become a problem. Aiswarya said their relationship stood a chance of being accepted by her parents because her boyfriend belonged to an OBC caste, just like her, “with equal status” even though he was not the same *jati* (she is Gounder and he is Naidu). She said that her parents would never have accepted a boy belonging to a Scheduled Caste or MBC (Most Backward Class) community, which have “less status,”
- Few parents will accept such matches. Even if they do, it will not be a grand wedding and the quantum of dowry given will be lower too, putting the couple at great financial risk. As a norm, our parents start saving about 100 *pawns* (about 8 gm) of gold to put on us on the day of the wedding... The expected gift is 100 *pawns* of gold and a car such as a Scorpio...<sup>17</sup> When we get married, we get that money. It gives us security during time of financial trouble, and respectability in our new homes. It ensures our comfort. Is it practical to let go of that money? Marrying with approval makes sure we can all hold our heads high.
- 33 Lowering her voice, she continued, “When we get married against their wishes, and they approve, there is still doubt. Many couples are poisoned after the wedding. These things happen. It’s just that the Divya-Ilavarasan case came to public. There are many such cases that we will never hear about.”
- 34 While Aiswarya was concerned with “equal status” and uses State-administrative categorization to hierarchize communities, other young women discussed how achieving a certain degree of status themselves could lend acceptability to their choices. Third-

year-student Uma accepted Gowthaman's proposal three years after he first declared his love for her (when they were studying together in Class 12). Back then she had rejected his proposal, saying she was too young and that she was afraid of what her parents would say. However, Gowthaman had persisted and her parents had caught her receiving "missed calls" from him. Suspecting her of having a relationship with him, they had beaten her. Depressed and angry at this turn of events, Uma had slit her wrists, and still bore the scars on her forearms—a reminder of the anguish her parents could put her through.

- 35 Three years later, Uma accepted Gowthaman's proposal, when the two lived in separate cities, studying at different colleges, saying that she had begun to love him back, and that she had also worked out a strategy to "convince" her parents. She said,

I want to pass Civils and become an IAS officer. I want to have that status. Having a daughter who is IAS is a matter of *geththu* (grand status) for the parents. They have to accept our love after that. They cannot stop me... I can study and learn. I want to take training, IAS coaching from Delhi, so I can pass the exam. I will try my best. I have already started classes...

- 36 Such strategies highlight the importance of status in whether a marriage is considered acceptable (or not). It was reiterated by different respondents that the members of an IAS cadre are in a class of their own: "he/she works for the country, not for caste" and has "power to beat all other statuses." Such a milieu, Uma said, had given her the confidence that her choice of partner would be taken seriously. When I visited her room in the evenings after class, I would find her reading the newspaper thoroughly, making notes, seeking mentorship on how to prepare for the exams.

- 37 Interestingly, when I spoke to her a few months later about her preparation for the Civil Services exam, she told me she had decided to put it off for a few years as her caste group (the Kamma Naidu/an OBC group) had begun lobbying for MBC (Most Backward Caste) status in Tamil Nadu. "There has just been a state-wide meeting of Kamma Naidu in which it has been decided that we will fight for MBC status, and I am going to wait ... my chance of cracking the exams will be higher then," she said. Her revised strategy for marriage now involved spending a few more years in higher education so her partner could "be settled" by the time her parents raised the question of marriage and began looking around for a suitable groom. This highlights how certain jobs can create enough "status" to be accepted by families, even though incidents such as the recent problematization of the inter-community marriage between two IAS toppers shows that the community may still politicize such marriages (Express Web Desk 2016).<sup>18</sup> However, what Aiswarya and Uma both make clear is that love had its own economies (also see De Neve 2016), and choice is asserted in ways that are compatible with projects of upward mobility for self and family.

- 38 Parental approval occupied a place of utmost importance in the narratives of my respondents—which in turn seemed to depend on status and respectability in ways which were compatible with modern careers, professions, and notions of success. However, it is not my intention to present an optimistic picture of changing caste equations. The case studies described above, if anything, indicate a certain pressure exerted by administrative categories such as OBC in the widening of endogamous norms (from being *jati*-specific to using terms such as "OBC" to re-define endogamy) rather than its reduced relevance. I did not encounter a single relationship that defied religious norms among the students although students often pointed to an inter-religious couple among the faculty

members as role models when it came to negotiating a choice marriage. However, such marriages are still widely frowned upon. I think it is not insignificant that I did not hear of a single case in which both partners said that the process of getting approval from parents would be completely smooth. As indicated in Nidhi's case study above, even endogamous marriages between known families had their share of hiccups.

## Conclusion

- 39 In this paper, I have looked at intimacy, romance, love and negotiation of prospective marriage in college life. Rather than cast college as a space of freedom from adult society or present "youth" in ways that show no concern for status (cf. Nakassis 2010), focusing on young women's marriage strategies and negotiation of youthful desires shows the ways in which status is embedded in engineering-college life.
- 40 Young women from upwardly mobile groups, while negotiating the difficult conditions of access to higher education, are influenced by notions of status enhancement. Parental approval occupies a place of utmost importance in the narratives of my respondents—which in turn rides on status and respectability in ways which were compatible with modern careers, professions, and notions of success. This paper, like the work of Grover (2011) and De Neve (2016) on love marriage, rejects the idea that modern relationships are entirely characterized by "individualism." While retaining a certain modern romantic ideal, "convincing parents" remained the cornerstone as my young respondents negotiated their choices and desires in what were sometimes very difficult circumstances.
- 41 One cannot rule out the idea that women are also influenced by the caste politics in the region, which significantly shape everyday life in an engineering college. I have shown the explicit ways in which caste lines are drawn in college in gendered terms. By highlighting the role of women's agency in such a context, in crafting what I call "subjectivities of suitability," I argue that women gauge and assess relationships for acceptability, even as they find ways to negotiate their desires.

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## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Dr. Janaki Abraham, Dr. Geetika Bapna, the three anonymous reviewers and the editors for their comments, discussion and suggestions on the paper. I thank my respondents for their time—and trust—in sharing their intimate lives.



2. In 2013–14, the region in which the college is located was the site of a few well-publicized Dalit murders, termed *aanava kolai* (“insolence murders”), that negatively politicized inter-caste marriage and sociality among college-going students. This was accompanied by damage to Dalit property and villages. The role of middle caste organizations such as the Vanniyar Sangam and Kongu Vellala Goundergal Peravai were widely implicated in these episodes.
3. In caste discourse (such as speeches by caste leaders and pamphlets released by caste associations), such misfortunes were characterized as the result of the State “appeasement” of Dalits through affirmative action such as reservations. These killings were further linked with the gendered discourses targeting the social lives of young people in engineering colleges, where young women ostensibly paired off with Dalit men. For instance, in December 2013, at a public rally of “Non-Dalits,” S. Ramadoss, president of Pattali Makkal Katchi (which has a Vanniyar base), accused Dalit youth of snaring young women from other communities with “...bogus professions of love... they wear jeans, T-shirts and fancy sun-glasses to lure girls from other communities,” he said. Citing statistics of a high rate of failure in inter-caste marriages, he had said that it was because “they were unions born out of caste design and not love” (Kolappan 2012:<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Ramadoss-consolidates-intermediate-caste-groups-against-Dalits/article12432099.ece>).
4. As members of the middle castes and Dalits vie for similar kinds of white-collar work, there is renewed resentment against Dalit claims to middle class identities through admission to engineering colleges and participation in youth culture. In all three “*aanava kolai*” cases that have received significant mainstream media attention since 2013, the victims were male Dalit engineering college students.
5. See Rekha Kaul (1993) and Carol Upadhyia (2016) for similar trends in the other South Indian states.
6. See Ram (2005): <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-no-jeans-skirts-or-red-shirts-what-next-4433>.
7. Also see Perveez Mody’s *The Intimate State* (2008) for a discussion of how couples’ lived experiences of love are heavily regulated by the State.
8. See Margaret Trawick’s *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (1990) for a detailed exegesis of these Tamil terms related to love.
9. Chinna College of Technology (CCT) is a pseudonym. Names and all identifiable markers of respondents have been changed to protect identities.
10. Mattison Mines’ (1996) work is important in showing that rather than a relic of rural *jajmani* systems, patrons as *Periya Aal* (big men) have been important in modern, urban contexts: Big-men create new institutions and organizations to benefit their constituents and expand their followings.
11. The percentage of young men was at 57 per cent, marginally more than the women.
12. See Rekha Kaul (1993) and Carol Upadhyia (2016) for a similar discussion on Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh respectively.
13. I was widely perceived as an “*Akka*” (older sister), who was experienced in such matters (I was widely questioned about my own romantic and conjugal involvement), and would not judge them harshly for their choices. The young men did not trust me as easily, and for a while rumors circulated that I was the Principal’s “spy,” which I quelled by asserting my identity as a student, with the help of the young women respondents who had accepted me more easily and saw me at the hostel.
14. Vanniyar, categorized as an MBC Group, are an agrarian caste, dominant in north and north-western Tamil Nadu, while Gounder dominate western parts of Tamil Nadu. Marriages between women of middle castes and Dalit men have been politicized. In 2012–13, when Divya, a Vanniyar young woman refused to obey a caste association diktat to return to her natal home after her marriage with a Dalit computer engineering student Ilavarasan, her community went on

rampage, setting three Dalit villages on fire. After a sustained campaign against the couple with the State's aid, Divya returned to her natal home and Ilavarasan was found dead near the railway tracks. Another horrific incident related to youth sociality, but not even marriage or a romantic relationship, occurred when the leader of a Gounder caste association attacked and abducted a Dalit youth, an undergraduate engineering student, merely for talking to his classmate, a young woman of the Gounder community, at a temple. The young man was later found murdered by the railway tracks. The accused was in flight for many months, before surrendering to the police at a large reception hosted in his honor by the Gounder community. The third murder took place in broad daylight, killing Sankar after he married Kausalya, a young woman of the Thevar community, which dominates the southern part of Tamil Nadu. All three cases have been well documented in the mainstream media.

15. However, identity polarizations existed along the axis of Tamil and non-Tamil; many foreign students also claimed to be discriminated against because of their race.

16. Mody (2008) argues that by leaving the family fold, these individuals enter a liminal state, or in-between status, as they join others who have done the same. But there can be no solidarity in what is essentially a "not-community," as Mody calls it, since the couples don't know each other, nor do they have commonalities other than their desire to "marry out." Community still is the strongest social bond, it would appear. Hence, it is no surprise that love-marriage is seen as being "dangerous and subversive" and that "a large majority of people view it as being so antithetical to the very fabric of social relations" (p. 275).

17. The brand-name of a Sports Utility Vehicle. From the number of gleaming black Scorpios that drove up the hostel gates to drop off students, I realized that it was one of the chief markers of high status in the area. The dowry expectation of a Scorpio speaks perhaps to market-shaped desires. The same dowry expectation was reiterated by several respondents of various castes in the college.

18. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/after-tina-dabi-announces-plan-to-marry-kashmiri-youth-hindu-mahasabha-calls-it-love-jihad-4401186/>

## ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I attempt to capture the "intimate aspirations" of young women as they emerge in the narratives of their relationships in college, their marriage strategies and negotiations in an engineering college in Tamil Nadu. Given the kind of surveillance and the disciplinary mechanisms implemented by college authorities, the engineering college is not just a site of youth sociality, but emerges in politically significant ways to influence students' "intimate aspirations." Relationship trajectories develop on a terrain of intersectionality between caste and gender as students explore possible marriage through the possibility of being able to "convince" parents. While potentially indicating shifts in endogamy, what these "choices" conclusively show is the crafting of suitable subjectivities within the realm of the acceptable. Young women emphasize their professional and academic achievements, and those of their partners, in ways that complement existing status, in order to highlight a suitable marriage. I argue that such responses show the concomitant ways in which caste and gender are produced.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** caste, gender, intimate relationships, family, marriage, engineering college, youth

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