

.....

## **2. IN FOOD AND HOLY MATRIMONY**

Ranjani Krishnakumar



On a hot summer day in a *panchayat* abiding village in Tamil Nadu, Deivaanai – an unmarried, orphaned young woman – goes door to door inviting people for a *moi virundhu* (literally, gift feast), the ritual of inviting villagers home for a meal and seeking alms. We learn just before this scene in the 1992 film *Chinna Gounder* that she has borrowed from an evil moneylender who is threatening her now to return his money. With nowhere to go, she arranges for a *moi virundhu* and serves the villagers a meal, in return for which they will give her some money in charity.

The role food plays in this scene is almost a reversal of the engagement between food and alms, often, almost always, the beggar/ seeker expects to be fed, while the giver gives food. In this case however, the reverse becomes true, with the seeker asking for money (which is still seen as alms rather than a fee/ price for the meal) in return for her meal. Hidden under the meal, quite literally, as the money is left under the banana leaf the food is served in, are the alms. Unexpectedly though, the benevolent village

headman and arbitrator, the Gounder—visiting the *moi virundhu* uninvited—finishes his meal and proposes marriage as the *moi*. What follows is Deivaanai's freedom from the entrapment of her loan and a new beginning in her marriage to the Gounder.

Though not always in this chronology, food and weddings have a twinning connection within Tamil cinema. No discussions about weddings ever take place without mentioning the feast. In the 1966 film *Major Chandrakanth*, when Mohan learns of his sister's prospective engagement, he breaks into a joyous song and dance. He begins the song with nothing other than "kalyana saappaadu podava, shall I serve you the wedding feast?" More often than not, the wedding feast is a metaphor for the wedding itself.

Therefore, as much cause for joy and celebration as the wedding itself is the feast that ensues. *Kalyana Samayal Sadham* from the 1957 film *Maya Bazaar*, even to this day, is a quasi-wedding feast anthem. Gatotkachan is the food-loving half-demon son of Bhima, one of

the Pandavas from the Hindu epic Mahabharata, wielding a mace, wearing a crown, bejeweled and hungry, admiring and lyrically cataloguing his feast before cleaning them off the plates and disappearing into thin air. Though Gatotkacha himself was half-demon (born to a *rakshasa* mother), he fills his hunger with an elaborate vegetarian meal here, perhaps owing to the background of the lyricist. Recently, a film came out about the pre-wedding jitters of a Brahmin couple, called *Kalyana Samayal Saadham*. The posters contained the name of the film written on a banana leaf - as if to say the film was being served as a feast. However, the film itself was primarily about performance in the sack and had very little, if anything, to do with food.

Ceremonially, as weddings themselves played a significant role in representing-if not creating and perpetuating-identities, food has been a Saussurean sign of "Tamil culture". Not just weddings, any traditional celebration revolves around the feast and hospitality-*virunthombal*-which Thiruvalluvar, the ancient Tamil poet, has neatly carved into the Tamil identity.

*Virunthombal*, of course, is tricky business. As the young Aiswariya comes of age, in the breakthrough 2004 film *Kadhal*-

set in the southern Tamil Nadu district of Madurai-her family throws for the community ..... a great party, a ceremony marking her entry into the 'marriageability' mould. An elaborate feast is served, for which male relatives wait by the table placing a sickle next to their banana leaves. This act of pulling out sickles and daggers, perhaps more familiar in the

[1]





the hero and his wife are chided, forced to stop their meal midway and leave to make place for a higher-class friend of the hosts. While the hosts are relatives of the hero, the fact that he hasn't so far been 'successful' in anything—fondly called *udavaakkarai* in Tamil cinema—makes him somehow unworthy of the wedding meal. The connection between 'privilege'—often meaning upper class, upper caste, and rich members of the community—and eating a good meal is prevalent across the board.

Upper-caste Brahmin weddings almost always have a Brahmin cook preparing the feast—with a team of seemingly unhygienic assistants for comic relief—though always staying at an arm's distance from their elite bosses. In the 1997 film *Aahaa*, for instance, the father of the hero's love interest is a debt-ridden gambler, shunned by the hero's father for not being in the same league as him, though both are Brahmins, the highest in the hierarchy of traditional Hindu caste system. That the cook comes halfway as an entrepreneur and meets the hero's enlightened father by the end of the film is worth nothing more than a mention in passing. The more popular Brahmin cook of Tamil cinema, Kameswaran, in the 1990 comedy film *Michael Madana Kama Rajan*, performs the blasphemy of inadvertently dropping a fish into the sambhar of a wedding feast

(of a stringently vegetarian Brahmin household). What ensues is Kameswaran chasing plate after plate, trying to find the fish, or should I say, banana leaf after leaf.

Within the closed doors of a Tamil home, however, the server of food is often the woman and man, the served. Even in matters related to marital celebrations, if it happens at home, it's the woman who wields the ladle. During the '*ponnu paakkum padalam*' (the first time the groom-to-be sees the bride-to-be or his family sees her), the girl, often shy and demure, serves coffee. The small cup of coffee becomes the brown and sunny ground on which several important decisions are made. However long the coffee serving can be extended—without raising the suspicion of the elders surrounding them—and whatever conversation the two can have, is all the time they get to make up their minds about each other.

A scene from the 1985 Pandiarajan film *Aan Paavam* has among the wittiest *ponnu paakkum padalam*-based scenes.

Holding the cusp of a steel tumbler, the girl extends it to the groom-to-be. Accepting it, pulling from the bottom of the tumbler, he finds that he is holding an empty tumbler, which was stacked under the one the girl is still holding,



with the coffee intact. When asked why she has brought two tumblers, she says "*sooda irundha aatthi kudikkat thaan*" (to help cool the coffee if it were too hot)". The boy then alliteratively responds with, "I almost thought it was to help return safely, if the coffee were too much".

Wedding feasts come and go in Tamil cinema in several ways. There is the comic female beggar who declares that she had to scrape off four plates of thrown away vegetable biryani before she gets her meal in the fifth one in *Shah Jahan*, or the three friends who gatecrash a wedding feast after being left without dinner in *Nanban*. In its own little ways, food tells stories of grandeur, ritual, heritage, class, caste and much else, as much in Tamil cinema, as off screen, in depicting the often startling reality of our existence.

--->

**Ranjani Krishnakumar** is a freelance writer based in Bangalore, India.

[1]. Illustration by *Pradeep Kambathalli*