

**Burial Rites/Rights, Acts of Grieving and Resistance Narratives: A
Reading of Iyamam's Short Stories**

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks at a selection of contemporary short stories. In Tamil, written by Imayam to explore caste dynamics and its operation in the domain of traditional cultural practices related to burial rituals and acts of grieving amongst the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu. The paper discusses two short stories and draws a parallel between the prejudices towards health workers and doctors during the Pandemic and the age-old association of caste pollution, stigma attached to touch, death-rites, and social segregation of Dalits. Drawing upon literary references from the classical to contemporary, the paper examines the negotiation of caste in our everyday life, taking charge of our emotional, social and spiritual needs, and thereby, encroaching upon our political and constitutionally guaranteed rights. The institutionalising of caste in our administrative, bureaucratic spaces is discussed to indicate an internalised and well-entrenched casteist structure of power.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Grieving, Burial, Caste, Institutionalized structures of power.*

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Burial Rites/Rights, Acts of Grieving and Resistance Narratives: A Reading of Imayam's Short Stories

The year 2020 was marked by unmitigated anguish, loss and isolation of individuals from traditional social moorings. Almost everyone who lived to tell the tale had lost a relative or a dear friend. Death no longer remained a distant, avoided topic of conversation amongst acquaintances or even with strangers. What made the loss unbearable was something specific to the nature of the Pandemic that spread due to the Corona Virus/Covid 19. The alarming rate of infection and its contagious spread had not only disrupted familiar modes of care and nurture of the ailing, but had also impacted acts of grieving, rites of cremation and burial. Traditionally, communities and individuals have coped with death, loss and grief through acts of collective mourning, rituals and rites related to cremation/burial and by public gathering of family, friends, neighbours to hold memorial meetings sanctioned by most faiths and religions. Public spectacle of lamentation, physical caressing of the corpse, ritual bathing of the corpse and performing rites signifying dignity and respect to the dead have been familiar to us since the dawn of human civilisation. Archaeological sites, museum exhibits testify to the tradition of ritual mourning and preserving the dignity of the dead. Classical literatures across the world abound in references to familial, and individual outpourings of grief as well as the due observances of death-rites guaranteeing dignity to the dead and the strengthening of civilised conduct among the survivors.

In this context, one cannot but recall Sophocles' play *Antigone* that dramatises the conflict between the ruler and the citizen, an uncle, and his niece over the denial of burial to a kinsman—nephew to Creon and a brother to Antigone. Creon's prohibition of burial rites for one of the two brothers killed in battle, is defied by Antigone as she valorises kinship ties and the sacred duty to respect the dead over a royal decree. Antigone's act has been hailed as endorsing a humane, civilised notion and has inspired awe and admiration on account of her

courageous resistance to an authoritarian, blasphemous decree steeped in *hubris*. A ritual burial of the dead is a right of the departed and a sacred duty of the kinsmen, a code endorsed and valorised by all communities globally. This time-honoured practice, however, was jeopardised during the Covid-19 Pandemic, in the year 2020, in many regions of India. In Karnataka, an old woman's corpse could be cremated only after the Police ensured protection to the family and to the corpse. In Punjab, villagers protested against cremation of those who died of Coronavirus. In Meghalaya, a doctor who succumbed to Covid, could be buried only at a site owned by the family, not in the cemetery designated for his community of Protestant Christians. The residents living near the cemetery did not allow the burial at the cemetery¹ (1).

In Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, the dead body of a neurosurgeon, Dr. Simon Hercules who had contracted the infection, most likely, from one of his patients, was not allowed to be buried in the cemetery designated for Catholic Christians at Kilpauk. The residents of Anna Nagar and Kilpauk, well-known affluent areas of the city, did not allow the burial of Dr. Simon's body. Incidentally, the doctor owned a nursing home, New Hope Medical Centre at Kilpauk. The Pandemic had unleashed fears of infection and fanned the notion of pollution among the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate. The ambulance carrying the doctor's corpse was stoned at, its driver was precariously injured, and the family not allowed to pay respects to their departed relative. The body was taken to the nursing home and sneaked out at night to be buried elsewhere. At the Velangadu cemetery, maintained by the corporation, a mob attacked the ambulance and its occupants (the deceased doctor's colleague and two assistants) with rods and sticks and violently defied the police presence. Dr. Pradeep Kumar and the two assistants from the nursing home hurriedly dug up a burial space with a single shovel which they passed around amongst themselves or used their bare hands to dig. They shoved the corpse into the dug -up earth, without any religious rite or prayer and hurried back to the ambulance to save their lives from the mob. This exercise was carried out between

11p.m. and 1 a.m., in the absence of the family of the deceased doctor. Grieving for a loved one had become a luxury, and the administration could not ensure dignity even to health workers and doctors who died while on official duty. Following a public outrage, the Tamil Nadu government passed an ordinance that imposed a three-year jail term for disrupting burial of Covid-19 victims.²

If such had been the fate in the context of the affluent and socially influential professionals, one dreads to imagine the plight of the poor and the marginalised during the Pandemic. In India, the Pandemic brought to the forefront unpalatable truths and discriminatory practices that have been institutionalised in our social and private spaces in the context of caste. Notions of pollution and social distancing, prevalent since centuries in the context of a casteist social structure began to find their way into the guidelines concerning physical distancing, isolation, sanitising surfaces and frequent cleaning of hands with water and soap following contact with fellow human beings. Notions of caste related pollution and Covid related infection began to coalesce which resulted in the alienation of the socially marginalised, preventing any kind of a possible integration with the mainstream society or benefit from its infrastructure, health care or community support. The incidents of denial of burial rights and acts of mourning discussed above, got particularly aggravated and acquire a planned, institutionalised mode of oppression in the context of Dalits in Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere). I shall take up a close reading of two short stories by the Tamil Dalit writer, Iyamam to foreground how similar practices related to burial rites/rights of the Dalit community were entrenched in Tamil society, much prior to the Pandemic year. A systemic failure that glossed over the constitutional rights of the Dalits, ignored the human rights of the grieving families and the community had perpetrated a denial of cemetery or burning grounds to Dalits in rural, feudal Tamil Nadu since long. Bama's *Karukku* (1992) narrates how Dalit Christians and upper caste Christians were buried at different cemeteries. The cemetery allocated for the Dalit community was on the outskirts of

the village and frequent clashes between the upper castes and Dalits ensued on this count. The police invariably supported the upper castes and took the Dalits into custody. Imayam's stories reflect upon these practices of omission and commission and draw our attention to narratives of resistance, subversion, and emerging consolidation of Dalit assertion through organised agitation and collective action by the community.

I shall examine two short stories from Imayam's Collection of Stories, *Nanmaaran Kottai Kadhai* (Cre-A,2019).³ The issue of caste is foregrounded from the victim's perspective in one of the stories while in the second story under discussion, a member from the hegemonic caste narrates his experience in relation to his involvement in the burial of a Dalit man's corpse. The stories relate to incidents located in a rural/semi-urban *oor* (village) of Tamil Nadu and the narratives reflect the living conditions of Dalit communities in the years 2013-17. The first story, *Nanmaaran Kottai Kadhai* (A Tale from the fort of Nanmaaran) begins innocuously with the transfer of Headmaster Ramanadhan from Cuddalore district to a Secondary School at a small town named NanmaaranKottai. He is eager to complete his term and return to his hometown without getting involved in any controversy at his new workplace. His middle class, careerist concerns and nonchalance about the conditions of the rural poor from marginalised communities are put to test on the very first day of reporting for work. A woman walks in with her three children (aged 7-12) and requests him to grant a transfer certificate to her two sons studying at the school in Standard 6 and 7. Ramanadhan assumes that the woman must have had a 'fight' with her mother-in-law, or her husband must have given her a beating and hence, is returning to her natal home with her kids. He asks her to return in the month of June, a good six months later, to get the T.C. as rules do not permit a transfer of students in the month of January. He also makes it clear that an exception could be made only for the children of an IAS officer or a Judge. When the woman repeats her request, the headmaster believes her to be a 'headstrong woman' and gets dismissive towards her. The rupture between the institution and

the individual, between the teacher and the taught, the officialdom and citizenry is well captured in the interaction between the headmaster supported and flattered by the Sports teacher on the one hand and a poor village woman with three distraught kids in tow, on the other. Ramanadhan is clueless about the caste dynamics that impinges upon the lives of students and their parents. His ignorance does not indicate an urban-rural divide; it rather underscores his indifference to all aspects barring his career, promotion, salary, and perks. He simply wants to ensure that the woman leaves his office quickly so that he might get his joining report ready and plan his transfer to a more happening place at the earliest. His presumption regarding 'the usual fight between spouses' is so overpowering that he fails to notice the marks of widowhood or signs of ritual mourning reflected in the freshly shaved heads of the young boys (2019:3).

Imayam juxtaposes a nonchalant, self-absorbed, middle-class, upper caste government official with a hapless, socially marginalised and an economically deprived family which is eager to quit the *oor* to escape violence and intimidation at the hands of the powerful and the privileged. The fact that privilege rests solely on one's caste position forms the central core of the story. It is the middle child of the woman who spills the truth behind the request for a transfer certificate. 'They killed our father with a sharp stick', he blurts out when the headmaster asks his mother if she wants to quit the village with her kids following a squabble with her husband (2019:13). The headmaster is rattled and notices for the first time that the three kids look distraught, stressed and their body language is at odds with their tender age. Imayam unsettles the reader as the tacit forging of class and professional privilege between the reader and the head of the school is revealed to be a fragile, hollow one, removed from the harsh ground reality of our social spaces. The comment by the Sports teacher, Dhanavel that 'this is a routine matter every year', pushes the reader and the headmaster into a deeper disquiet and a realisation that one cannot remain myopic for long in such a context (2019:15).

As the story unfolds, the entrenchment of caste in cultural practices and celebrations during festivals is shown to precipitate violence, abuse and oppression of the labouring Dalits. The day following the Pongal festival, a race for the bulls and oxen is held in all the villages and small towns in Tamil Nadu and the owner of the winner in the race is given a cash reward by the organising committee. Chelvamani's husband Muthuraman, a docile farm hand is forced by the local Panchayat Chairman's (talaivar) brother to let his bull run the race. Startled by the bursting of firecrackers, Muthuraman's bull runs helter-skelter, crosses the finish line and is declared the winner. Muthuraman is petrified as he knows that the talaivar and the residents of the *oor* would not appreciate a Dalit man's cattle to walk away with the booty. As he tries to sneak away from the venue with his frail, frightened bull, he is surrounded by the leader and his rowdy entourage. They heckle him, hit him and shower him with casteist abuses. They question him as to how he dared to let his bull participate in the race in which many villages took part. They hold him responsible for the dishonour brought upon the upper castes of his *oor* by letting a 'Dalit bull' win the race. Dalit hamlets traditionally termed *cheri*, have begun to be notified as 'colony' in recent parlance. As Muthuraman was a resident of a Dalit colony, his bull too was a 'colony bull'. Terms like 'their street', 'ourcolony', 'their bulls', 'colony bulls' normalise caste hegemony and the prevailing social hierarchy in the interaction amongst the hegemonic and the marginalised communities (2019: 15, 16).

Young men push rods and sticks into his bull's eyes, beat up Muthuraman and intimidate him. The fact that a Dalit's bull had won the race hosted by the village Panchayat is unpalatable to the upper castes. An enraged crowd, egged on by the Panchayat leader, pierces Muthuraman's bull with a sharp stick that sports a knife at its end (*chulukki*) and the bull falls down dead. In the presence of Chelvamani and their kids, Muthuraman is slashed by the same weapon that killed his bull and is laid low. Chelvamani is forced by the village elders to sign a paper claiming that Muthuraman had died as he was hit by a bull! The young men who wielded the

chulukki are given a safe passage by the caste leaders and the colony residents are intimidated that their huts would be burnt down at night if Muthuraman is not cremated immediately. Besides, they insist that the dead body should not be buried as per his community's custom. The corpse is not allowed to be taken home; the wife and children are prevented from mourning in public or offer any kind of death-rites. Imayam brings in an oblique reference to the Keezhvenmani massacre of 44 Dalits that took place in 1968 when upper caste landowners burnt down the *cheri*. They trapped the Dalit women, children and men into a hut and set fire to it, killing them instantly. The fact that a Panchayat leader can threaten a similar assault in 2013 shocks the Headmaster out of his wits. The violence against a Dalit man and his bull are at par, indicative of violation of rights by hegemonic groups against human lives and cattle when located within the caste matrix. His bull, in fact, is repeatedly, referred as a Dalit bull, a "colony maadu".

Chelvamani's decision to quit such a village reflects the enormity of intimidation, fear of survival and the need to address the traumatic experience of witnessing a public lynching of her husband in the presence of her children and the helpless 'colony' residents. Her insistence upon an immediate transfer certificate for her school-going children underscores the only ray of hope as it points out the eagerness to continue schooling after re-locating to another village. This is also her act of resistance against caste hegemony by affirming her faith in ensuring education and a safer, better environment to her children. However, do indifferent Headmasters like Ramanadhan and insensitive teachers like Dhanavel hold out any promise for a better future? The mother and the kids display a strong will to survive with better dignity and hope to do so through formal schooling. Caste stands institutionalised in this village, reflecting its pervasive and well-entrenched hegemony. The Dalit family's right to mourn its dead, carry out death-rites as per their traditional practice is denied by the caste-infested Panchayat. It orders the corpse to be cremated ('burn the body'), thereby infringing upon the family/community

tradition of burying its dead. The wife laments, “I could not touch, handle or weep over my husband’s corpse.” (2019: 20) In Indian society, the contagion of touch and pollution caused by a physical contact with the lower castes is considered far more deadly than the spread of Covid-19. In fact, the protocol regarding social interaction during the pandemic has been equated with the mimicking of Brahminical, purificatory rituals pertaining to caste related touch and pollution, in practice since long in our country and in particular, in Tamil Nadu.

In the second story, *Police*, Imayam posits how denial of death rites, and the institutional tampering of the Dalit community’s traditional, cultural practices impinge upon dignity and self-esteem of Dalits. The dynamics of power, political, judicial, bureaucratic, operates within a casteist, stratified social matrix, pushing the hegemonic and the marginalised groups to feel equally oppressed. Imayam’s story does not endorse the hegemonic caste’s self-representation as a victim of Dalit self-assertion. It does, however, narrativise the conflicting interests of the two groups enforced to interact from the two ends of the caste spectrum, from the perspective of a Police constable drawn from the oppressor caste. The story thereby problematises the invasion of caste negotiations that pervade our administrative corridors and pockets of hegemonic power and social capital. It is interesting to note that the central incident of Imayam’s story, *Police* has been dramatised, filmed and fictionalised in Tamil by four other writers, directors, in a span of 2 to 3 years. One can sense the urgency to revisit a particular incident, in different mediums, within a particular timeframe as indicative of the angst and anger against forms of subjugation in the private domain of Dalits, on aspects considered most sacred by all communities. A Tamil movie, *Maveeran Kittu* directed by Suseendran (2016), another Tamil movie *Manushangada* by Amshan Kumar (2018), a short story *IranduDukkam* by Azhagiya Periyavan (2018), a play *Ella Uyirukkum* directed by Prasanna Ramaswamy (2019), add a significant discourse of inter-textuality and blurring of documentation vs representation of an incident that took place in a village called Tirunaal Kandachcheri near

Vazhuvoor in Tamil Nadu in 2015 and repeated in 2016. Imayam's story was published in 2017 and anthologised in 2019.⁴

The incident at Kandachcheri pertained to disallowing of burial rights to Dalit residents of the town who lived in two of its streets. They were hardly 200 in number and the upper castes were in a majority. The Dalits did not have a burial ground to bury their dead, and had to walk a considerable distance to the riverfront to complete the death-rites. They were denied entry into the streets where upper castes lived, thereby putting curbs on funeral processions of Dalits. The deaths of an 80 year old Kunjammal in November 2015 and of her husband Chellamuthu, aged 90 in January 2016 led to a clash between the Dalit community on the one hand and the nexus of the police, the collectorate and the upper castes, on the other. The corpses were forcibly buried by the police, disallowing the Dalits to pass through the *oor*, lathi charging the mourners and preventing the family to observe funeral rites or ritual grieving. The incidents received wide coverage in the media, but it did not lead to any action from the government agencies. The five interventions in the creative platforms of cinema, theatre and fiction mentioned above reflect a critical appraisal of this incident from real time. Imayam's short story, *Police* depicts the impact of the media coverage of the role of the police in the burial of a Dalit corpse in terms of eroding the self-respect of an upper caste police constable who took part in the funeral and whose caste was the same as that of the implicated hegemonic group in the said incident. This self-perception of the implicated oppressor group forms the site of representation of caste internalisation in core institutions of our polity in contemporary times. The layering of historicity and contemporaneity underscores Imayam's critique of continued caste oppression even after 71 years of Constitutional safeguards envisaging equality and principles of social justice for all citizens.

In the story *Police*, a surreal account unfolds of a young, newly recruited constable's tale of angst and humiliation at being exposed to media glare and a backlash from his caste brethren

from his hometown on account of the coverage of his participation at the burial of a Dalit man's corpse.⁵ (5) Newspapers and news channels capture what they consider as newsworthy, the escorting and burial of a corpse of a Dalit man by the police to avoid a law-and-order issue between the upper castes and Dalit communities. Iyamam's unwavering focus on the self-representation of the oppressor caste through an irrational, sentimentalised posturing of an empowered youth who insists upon quitting his plump, government. job to save face and his caste honour captures how it is a bizarre and provoking response. The narrative is also a scathing critique of the standpoint of dominant castes regarding caste hierarchy and inflexible traditionalism. The trappings of modernity in the guise of media literacies, mobile phone culture and technological advances and job perks do not nullify age old stigmatising of social profiling and conduct of individuals solely based upon one's caste identity. While the middle aged, careerist, corrupt Head Constable Rajendran harps upon his 20 years of experience in the police force and calls upon the young Constable Sreenivasan to desist from quitting a government job with perks and privileges, the younger man is shown to be far more anxious and convinced by practices of segregation, social stigma, notions of polluting touch and public image of oneself. His eagerness to show solidarity with the oppressor caste to which he and Rajendran belong to, brings out the alarming spread of regressive mindset among today's youth. While Rajendran has made peace with conflicts at work on account of caste identity as he has been won over by job security, perks including power and easy money (euphemism for bribe) and looks forward to his promotion, Sreenivasan is willing to quit his job that expects him to erase his caste identity in the name of official duty. He laments that it is the wretched police uniform that has pushed him to touch and lift a Dalit corpse, dig a pit and bury its remains. The act pushes him to a state of self-loathing, and he weeps copiously, wails loudly and laments his fate.

The story *Police* is a testimony of the oppressor class to its adherence to unwritten, inhumane, illegal but traditional practices of discrimination towards Dalits who have, over the decades, begun to inhabit residential spaces occupied by upper castes. Sreenivasan recounts that in his *oor*, Dalits are not allowed to ride a bicycle/motorcycle or mount a bullock cart. Their cycles and bikes are punctured by upper caste youths to force them to walk on foot. Hailing from such a place, he is outraged that he had to carry a Dalit corpse, bury it in a pit and be photographed shouldering the bier. He breaks down and strikes his hands on the walls. His self-loathing, borne out of his internalised caste taboos and stigma of touch, results in loud lamentations, and bouts of wailing. He is so traumatised at being reduced to be a 'vettiyan'/gravedigger that he forgoes food, unable to eat with those very hands which dug up a pit for a Dalit corpse. Imayam does not attempt an empathetic, psychological probing of Sreenivasan's response. His representation of Sreenivasan foregrounds the well-entrenched hegemonic, regressive mindset of upper caste youth that fails to perceive Dalits as fellow human beings. In the story, Rajendran's pragmatic counselling of his volatile, aggressive, and unambitious younger colleague juxtaposes a restrained, middle-class, casteist sensibility with that of a rigid, unfiltered casteist sensibility. Rajendran is eager to help Sreenivasan only because he hails from the same caste as his own. His caste fraternity reaches out to protect Sreenivasan's job that ensures "money, power, privilege and promotion." (2019:48) He also rightly locates the strife over the burial in the denial of permission to use the common pathway by his own caste group. He is piqued by the agitationist strategies of Dalit youth who manage to get a directive from the Court that the community may take the funeral procession through the common pathway of the *oor*.

The collusion of the collector, district administration, the superintendent of police in cutting off the electricity to the Dalit hamlet, to let the corpse in the freezer rot, to defy the Court order and issue a directive that the corpse be carried by the police through the fields for burial instead

of allowing the family to perform the rites is a clear reflection of entrenchment of caste in our administrative, governmental institutions. Rajendran comments that our courts pass orders without taking cognizance of our traditions and practices related to caste structure! The undermining of Constitutional guarantees is complete as the protectors of the law concur with the illegal and inhumane practices. The collector orders that the National Security Act be invoked against the Dalit mourners and they be 'fired at' if they seek to participate in the burial rituals. The SP arrests the young men from Dalit community and 'cleared the body' in 30 minutes.

Unpersuaded by Rajendran's counsel, Sreenivasan decides to quit his job and affirm his loyalty towards his caste. A rejection of modernity by hegemonic community, a critique of the media for its failure to disseminate news/prevaling conditions, the undermining of Judicial orders and defiance of the core principles of our Constitution by the executive wings of the government are depicted in this short story to reflect the alarming state of our caste-infested polity in the second decade of the 21st century. The story indicates the year as 2017 in the conversation between Rajendran and Sreenivasan. Rajendran's wife Mallika requests her husband to take care of Sreenivasan as he is 'our fellow', indicating the internalisation of dominant casteist ideology amongst upper caste women.

While Chelvamani, the woman victim of caste hate does not weep or appeal to the emotions of her oppressors, Sreenivasan, the male oppressor perpetuating caste hate, weeps copiously and resorts to melodrama and lachrymose sentimentalism. Iyamam's nuances of gendering caste in both the stories is remarkable and subtle. It is equally interesting to note that while the Dalit woman victim takes recourse to legal remedies and decides to educate her children in a different village from the site of caste violence in the story *Nanmaaran Kottai Kadhai*, a member of the oppressor caste decides to quit his job, relocate to his ancestral village to show solidarity with his upper caste community in the story *Police*. Dalit youth is shown to take the path of agitation,

petitioning the court for the right to public passage but is countered by the nexus of the district administration, the village panchayat, the police force and the caste leadership. Iyamam's depiction of a Dalit victim as a progressive survivor on the one hand, and an empowered member of the hegemonic caste as a regressive quitter, on the other, juxtaposes a discourse of hope, resilience and dignity of the self with that of a discourse of impunity, arrogance, privilege and power. The practice of upholding notions of pollution, a violent denial of death-related rites leads to an institutionalised undermining of rights of Dalits to practise their community beliefs and practices pertaining to performing of death-rites. A similar trajectory emerged in the times of the recent Pandemic that alerted us to notice a systemic failure to protect the vulnerable from an irrational containment of their rights with regard to the dignity of the dead.

The sacred nature of death rites, acts of community grieving and public participation of family and friends at death related rituals are not only acts of emotional purging but carry a deep sense of identification with our spiritual needs and civilisational markers that valorise fraternity/community bonding over isolation; social integration over alienation. Antigone's defiance of Creon's decree that denied burial rituals to one of her brothers remains valid in our contemporary society to inspire us to defy the dehumanising structure of caste and its politics of hate and discrimination. Our internalised taboos concerning pollution, both caste-related and death-related, resurfaced during the Pandemic to an irrational fear-mongering, mob culture of targeting corpses of victims of a virus. However, the sickness lay elsewhere. It was an extension of pollution discourse and the stigma of 'touch' in the context of a hierarchical, casteist social structure that spilled over to metropolitan pockets, across regions in a venomous denial of a dignified cremation/burial to Covid-victims. The healing lies within each one of us, the Dalit and the non-Dalit, to uphold the core principles of our Constitution in letter and spirit.

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³ Imayam. *Nanmaaran Kottai Kadhai*. Chennai: Cre-A,2019, p.10. All references to the text are to this edition, translation mine for the purposes of this paper, hereafter indicated in the text.

⁴ I am indebted to Stalin Rajangam for sharing details of dates, names of directors and the incident that inspired five different renditions in multiple genres.

⁵ Imayam. *Police* in *Nanmaaran Kottai Kadhai*. Chennai: Cre-A, 2019, pp.31-49. All references to the text are to this edition, translation mine for the purposes of this paper, hereafter indicated in the text.