In an India that is fractured along caste lines, a marriage is never the simple establishment of a relationship between two independent, adult individuals. Instead, it can involve not only the two families, but whole communities as well. An inter-caste marriage without parental approval is, therefore, a potential trigger for violence in rural India. The caste group that is relatively higher in the social hierarchy sees any such marriage as a social affront, especially if the other caste group is Dalit. Wednesday’s attack on three Dalit colonies in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, which ended in the burning down of 268 houses, is another shocking instance of how social stigmas engendered by caste identities can provoke large-scale violence. The arson was the immediate fallout of the suicide of a caste Hindu man whose daughter had married a Dalit living in one of the colonies. Apparently unable to accept his daughter’s decision to marry a Dalit, the man opted to end his life. For a bride’s family, especially if it is higher in the caste ladder, the socially-sanctioned stigma associated with an inter-caste marriage is greater. Women carry a far heavier responsibility of having to protect the “family honour”, which is a euphemism for the feudal notions of social status and acceptance held by the senior male members of the family. Indeed, the prevalence of such notions is an indicator of the secondary status accorded to women in these communities. Worryingly, in rural Tamil Nadu where caste conflicts over marriages, religious rituals or access to public resources are common, the police were slow to sense the potential for trouble. A few days before the violence, the newly wedded couple had approached the police for protection fearing attacks by members of the bride’s community. Other than providing assurances and holding out promises, the police seem to have taken no preventive steps. A self-styled court in the village ordered the Dalit man to send his wife back to her parents, but the woman refused to leave her husband. This should have alerted the police to the possibility of trouble. Although the suicide, the immediate trigger for the attack, could not have been predicted or prevented, the police had adequate reason to apprehend the tensions and ample time to take precautionary steps. The only reason that none in the Dalit colonies suffered any bodily harm is that all the residents had left their homes and taken shelter in another village. Social stigmas and caste inequalities cannot be wiped out overnight, but surely the law enforcers can show greater anticipation and quicker reflexes in familiar situations that give rise to tensions between caste groups.