

## ANDAMAN LOVES: MARRIAGE PRACTICES, SECULARISM, AND ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION<sup>52</sup>

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The Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal are known to anthropological audiences through Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalist study of its indigenous islanders (1922). Less known, however, is the fact that the islands have become a Union Territory of India and the homeland of a culturally diverse settler society, called "Mini-India" (Zehmis 2017). Crystallized as a result of various subaltern migrations from all over South and Southeast Asia since 1858, the Andaman society represents numerous regional, religious, class, caste, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

My PhD project on questions of migration and subalternity in the Andamans was supervised by Frank Heidemann. Frank's research on topics of migration, statehood, social-engineering, and politics in postcolonial India has gained new traction during different periods in the last three decades. As a teacher, supervisor, and in the course of a jointly conducted research project on migration and place-making in the Andamans, he put repeated emphasis on the importance of analyzing marriage practices in order to understand how particular collective boundaries and commonalities as well as questions of power, knowledge, and status between different communities are established and maintained in a particular local field site.

During almost two years of fieldwork in the Andamans between 2006 and 2012, I came across a broad set of conjugal norms and practices that deviated from conventional studies of kinship and caste in India: when I asked how and in which way my interlocutors from migrant and settler communities had married, they reasoned that they had chosen a marital partner for themselves out of "love"; they had acted against a deeply ingrained sense of obedience and duty towards their families and community elders who usually exert the customary right to arrange a "suitable", endogamous match within their own caste for potential brides and grooms. Instead of pleasing these expectations, my interlocutors had chosen to question, challenge, and disobey "traditional" norms that linked all members of their communities to patriarchal control but also provided them with a sense of

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belonging and collective identification. Soon, I came to regard “love marriages” as symptomatic of an antagonistic struggle between individualism and collectivism, between self-realization and a sense of duty, between choice and control; a struggle, which, in numerous cases, caused strong affective responses, and, in others, deep rifts between different members of a kin network.

Analysing such a contested field of social negotiation, this chapter concentrates on the topic of “love marriage” and asks for the impact of globalization, notions of modernity and secularism on inter-community marriage practices (cf. Donner 2008). The essay examines the ways in which residents of the Andaman migrant and settler society appropriate globalized ideas about “romantic love” to their lifeworld and their conjugal relations. Seeking to transcend popular assumptions about the “homogenization” of values through cultural and economic globalization, the ethnographic example of the Andamans also serves to demonstrate the formation of “alternative modernities” (Chatterjee 2004) – cultural appropriations and diversifications of ideas of being modern at the local level – as a particular local response to globalization.

### Impacts of Globalization

The concept of “love” as a multi-sensory, embodied experience of longing, desire, loss, and gratification has a long and complex trajectory in South Asia.<sup>53</sup> Comparatively recent, however, are the ever growing instances in which notions of “romantic love” are evoked in order to gain agency and self-determination in the choice of future spouses. This phenomenon can be interpreted as being strongly influenced by the global dissemination of ideas about “romantic love” that “flow” across the markets of the planet along with consumer goods, media, people, finance, and technologies (Appadurai 1996) and that constantly evoke local appropriations of transnational discourses such as liberalism, freedom of choice, and “modernity”.<sup>54</sup> Globalization has brought about significant changes in the Andamans, too:

Until about a decade ago, the islanders had been relatively cut off from the Indian subcontinent as well as the rest of the planet. This isolation, caused by the distance of more than one thousand kilometres from the mainland and by the absence of proper mass communication, was somehow minimized by the following

<sup>53</sup> In Urdu and Hindi, for example, the word “love” can be translated in various ways (*pyar, muhabbat, ishq, prem, vasna*) – each of them signifying a distinct, but often interlinked, sphere of meaning (emotional, sensual, spiritual, devotional, sexual), perception, and social practice.

<sup>54</sup> Being aware of general critique and numerous challenges to the concept of “modernity” (Latour 1993; Ingold 2000) due its legacy of post-enlightenment rationalism as well as its reliance on a number of dualisms, such as those of mind and matter and nature and culture, I treat modernity in this chapter as an empirically observable concept that plays an important role in the social imaginary of my interlocutors and their repetitive appeals to ideas of being “modern” versus “traditional”.

developments: First, the arrival of cable TV and communication media like mobile phones or the internet provided the islanders with means to participate in the transnational public sphere. Second, the deadly and destructive tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, which had also affected the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, multiplied national and international media attention and caused a massive flow of capital for rehabilitation projects. Moreover, the introduction of several low-cost airlines in 2006 has increased the development of foreign and domestic tourism as well as the islanders' mobility.

These changes have had a considerable influence on the islanders' cultural appropriations of ideas, values and discourses from transnational as well as Indian metropolitan contexts. Locals have shifted their perception from inhabiting a space rather outside the world to a place within the globalized world. At the same time, local youths have adopted the increasingly body-conscious pop culture of the metro cities, where many of the Andaman youngsters are studying. This has also resulted in a growth of local dance and music schools and in a visible change of fashion: Jeans, T-shirts, sneakers are popular among the boys accompanied very often by the obligatory motor-cycle and high-tech smartphones; some girls wear jeans, skirts and high heels, too. Further, locals working in the growing tourism industry have been considerably influenced by the norms, values, and practices of the tourists from metropolitan Indian cities or from abroad. In personal conversations, many contemporary youngsters compared the Andamans with the state of Goa, known to be India's "hippest" party and beach destination. Listening to Goa-Trance and other genres of international music, taking drugs and alcohol, and having love affairs seems to be an integral part of their imaginations of "transnational hipness". Such changes coming along with globalization can be regarded as accompanying and stimulating the islanders' adoption of ideas about romantic love, individualism and self-realization.

### Love versus Arranged Marriage

For numerous interlocutors in the Andamans – unfortunately, most of my information on the topic stems from male interlocutors due to my own male gender role in the field – notions of romantic love played a big role in their relationships with potential, present or imaginary partners and spouses. While the concept of romantic love is omnipresent in movies, songs and every-day conversations, the task of finding a loving or beloved partner was, in many cases, complicated and led to manifold frustrations. Those who had already married out of love, however, put particular emphasis on their independent choice of a partner. Most of these unions had crystallized out of pre-marital relationships, and had caused conflicts with their kith and kin.

In South Asia, the arrangement of a marital match could be broadly described as the result of a collective negotiation between family, kin, and caste networks of more or less equivalent hierarchical (and/or class) status that follow complex rules of lineage and caste endogamy in order to build or maintain alliances and to gain or retain property and power.<sup>55</sup> Arranged marriages regularly involve a series of visits between both parties to get to know each other and to assess the suitability of the match as well as to reach agreements on economic matters, such as the bearing of costs for wedding rituals and festivities, and the giving of dowry or gifts by one party to the other (usually by the family of the bride to that of the groom). In addition, many Hindus consult astrologists in order to find an auspicious day for the wedding. In arranged marriages, “love” is expected to develop between bride and groom after the wedding (Mody 2008:8). Love is perceived as “a gift from god, gifted to two people on the day of their marriage. Love isn’t something that one does, that is lust. Love is given, only by god” (ibid.7). That’s why love marriage is “widely viewed as a most unholy union” (ibid.8).<sup>56</sup>

In opposition to arranged marriages, love marriages are based on individual choice and the individual compatibility of partners (ibid.12). They, therefore, tend to threaten the social compatibility of alliances created by arranged marriages and imply a gradual breaking away from collective rules, norms, and practices – and, sometimes, even an outright rejection of patriarchal norms. With increased exposure to the global public sphere and aligned ideas of liberalism and self-realization, the consummation of love marriages – which still remains rather an exception than the norm – seems to gain more traction among Indian citizens of the urban middle and upper classes; they appear to have, to a larger degree, appropriated liberal notions of romantic love and individual choice.<sup>57</sup>

Diverging from these trends in scale and dimension, in the Andamans, the practice of love marriage pervades all classes, religions, and spaces (urban/ rural). Here, unlike in most other parts of India, the number of love marriages appears to be extraordinarily high. Due to the absence of a quantitative study, one has to rely on local estimations that vary greatly between 20 and 80 percent. Deducted from my own observations, I would tentatively estimate the current number of

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<sup>55</sup> In spite of the fact that many contemporary Indians verbally negate the continued existence of caste vis-à-vis foreign visitors, caste continues to assume an important role in the social life of the subcontinent.

<sup>56</sup> Pervez Mody (2008:8) writes about love marriages: “They challenge the ‘natural’ (that which *kudrath* [sic] or nature has created) caste hierarchy and social considerations of class, status and standing. Based on *vasna* [sic], lust, and far from being social events, they are considered to be anti-social and *kharab* [sic], bad.”

<sup>57</sup> A survey on marriage practices conducted by an Indian magazine in the 1990s revealed: In a poll of 616 people from the upper and middle class segment living in metropolitan cities, 19 percent had stated that the reason for their marriage with a certain partner was “love”, while 81 percent had married because kin networks had arranged the union (Mody 2008:43). The numbers of love marriages among villagers is supposed to be much lower.

love marriages in the Andamans to be around 50 percent of the total unions that are presently consummated.

The majority of my interlocutors pointed out that there was a rising number of love marriages as compared to thirty years ago. They linked the increase of love marriages to growing literacy and heightened emphasis on individuality. Other important factors mentioned were higher education and employment in distant places where people had pre-marital or extra-marital affairs. Patriarchal interlocutors held the employment of women responsible for diminishing their role as mothers; failing to instil moral duties in their children, these would, later on, show less respect towards their parents.

Transcending these formally antagonist categories, many “love” marriages are, in fact, consummated according to a third, hybrid combination, called “love-cum-arrangement”: here, individual choice and notions of romantic love influence the ways in which the spouses become partners in marriage. At the same time, their families and kin networks give their consent to the match, often following periods of reluctance, debate, and conflict; consecutively, the wedding is arranged through negotiations with the other party. As a tendency, these matches are rather given consent in cases of corresponding – if not equal – class or caste status, belonging to the same religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh), denomination or sect, and if the spouses are members of the same linguistic or ethnic group (Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayali, Punjabi, Oraon, Munda, etc.). A smaller but not insignificant number of “love marriages” are so-called “court marriages”. These unions are registered in front of a legal representative of the state in order to render them legitimate in legal matters. This usually happens if the marriage had not been sanctioned by the spouses’ families. These weddings often involve secrecy as well as the change of places of residence due to excommunication or the social ousting of the couple by their kin. However, in a lot of cases I came across, the ousted partners had been forgiven and reintegrated by their families after some time.

Concerning such a fluidity and flexibility of the categories of “love” and “arranged” marriage, it is useful to interpret the statements of interlocutors who claimed to have followed either the one or the other model according to larger contexts and perceived needs of self-representation. Their statements may thus be viewed as being influenced by certain desires to display themselves as “modern”, individualistic, and liberal, or, in opposition, as “traditional” and conscious of their duty to maintain collective boundaries, hierarchies, and status.

A high number of love and inter-community marriages in the islands leads one to ask for the underlying norms, values, and practices that may have contributed to this empirically observable phenomenon. Seeking to answer this question, I claim that the emergence of a specific social structure turned out to be a crucial enabling factor for the consummation of these unions in the Andamans. This accommodating social structure may be regarded as the result of “manifestations of history”

(Heidemann and Zehmisch 2016) that can be understood when taking into account how local society had been crafted since colonial times.

### Cultural Creolization through Marriage

Historical processes of migration, social-engineering, and place-making created the preconditions for processes of “cultural creolization” (Hannerz 1992: 264–5) through the institution of marriage.<sup>58</sup> After the Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857, the British rulers installed a penal colony in the Andamans to where they deported rebellious and criminal convicts from various castes, regions, and religions of the Indian subcontinent and Burma. The transportation of subaltern convicts had the goal, besides punishment and isolation, to rehabilitate prisoners as self-supporting peasant settlers and to colonize the islands. In 1862, the British started to bring female convicts to the colony and married them to rehabilitated self-supporters. This move was intended to stop “unnatural vices” (same-sex love), to provide convicts with a sense of reward, and to recreate an Orientalist vision of Indian society as an ordered (heteronormative) agricultural society of sedentary peasant families (Zehmisch 2017:52–53). Regarding the consummation of convict marriages, the spouse and groom had to be from the same religion, i.e. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian. In addition to that, the British sought to recreate caste hierarchies by permitting marriage between Hindus only within reconstructed categories oriented on the Orientalist value idea of *varna* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra). However, because this system did not consider the diversity and complexities of castes and subcastes from the convicts’ different regions of origin on the subcontinent, and because there was a lack of female convicts (on average a rate of one woman to ten men), it soon came to be adulterated and hybridized: inter-caste marriages between convicts belonging to largely incompatible castes became a necessity of successful match-making and developed into a common practice (ibid.60). In these matches, female convicts’ agency was high, because they had the possibility to choose their husband and to end the marriage if they weren’t treated correct by their husbands. Ideas of “love” were probably present but not central to processes of match-making as they have become in the here and now.

The British named the descendants of these ex-convict marriages the “Local Born” community. This administrative category transformed into a nomenclature that provided an overarching sense of local belonging to this community of “hybrid” (Bhabha 1994) regional, ethnic, linguistic and caste parentage. Contemporary Local Born interlocutors told me that rigid rules of connubiality, which had

<sup>58</sup> Cultural creolization means that diverging values, norms, and practices are mutually enmeshed and enmeshing (Knörr 2014:28). Ghosal (2001:206) described creolization as a defining feature of the Andaman society.

already eased up due to the spatial and personal distance to their ancestral places of origin, came to be once and again creolized by the following generations who, out of necessity, married to other Local Borns of mixed origin. In addition to that, they also consummated marriages with members of two separately settled convict communities, the Moplah and Bhanu, *Adivasi* contract labourers from the Chotanagpur plateau called the “Ranchis”, or free settlers such as the Karen from Burma.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, in the decades to come, many Local Borns raised their socio-economic status through education and employment in the administration, which rendered caste as a marker of status increasingly meaningless. Facing less social control through extended family networks, inter-community marriages, even some cases of inter-religious marriage – though generally undesired – came to be a regular feature of the island society during colonial times.

When talking about the marriage practices during colonial times to some Local Born interlocutors, they told me that some of their ancestors had already married out of “love – an early indication that the atmosphere of the colonial settler society proved to be a fruitful foundation for the later appropriation of globalized notions of romantic love. Subsequently, the Local Borns’ assimilation of difference through marriage and cultural creolization became manifest as a core value of the contemporary Andaman society (ibid.61–62). As a result, colonial and postcolonial knowledge production characterized the islanders as cosmopolitan, “secular” and “modern”. Notions of secularism and modernity linked to marriage practices are, therefore, not a recent phenomenon, but have been repeatedly evoked and reinterpreted since colonial times.

After Partition, East Bengal Hindu refugees, Repatriates from Sri Lanka and Burma as well as landless refugee families from South India were settled by the state in the islands under Rehabilitation and Colonization Schemes. In addition to that, autonomous migrants – mainly in search of employment – came from all over of India. Broadly generalizing, I observed that subsequent generations of migrants and settlers, who were born in the Andamans, gradually adopted the practice of inter-community marriage that had been established by the Local Born community. Moreover, the islands have – in comparison to other regions of India – high numbers of literacy and good standard of life indicators, among others, due to employment opportunities in the administration and in the growing construction and tourism industry – all of which tend to influence local modes of self-expression as “modern” and “secular” citizens of India.

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<sup>59</sup> The 1931 Census listed 31 spoken languages, of which the most prominent were Nicobarese, Hindi, Burmese, Punjabi, Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, Andamanese, Pashto, and Telugu (Dhingra 2005:162). These languages were spoken parallel to Urdu or Hindustani, the *lingua franca* of the penal colony and vernacular of the Local Born community.

## Secularism and Modernity

In the Andamans, a high proportion of love marriages seems to neatly fit into the ideology of secularism and the accompanying discourse of modernity. As the discourse of secularism became hegemonic in the decades after Independence, it took increasing influence on local articulations of belonging.<sup>60</sup> Secularism thus provided an ideological foundation to regard love marriages as characteristic of a modern and secular mind-set that has a potential to challenge or transcend endogamous norms and practices. Perveez Mody (2008:33) writes:

The ‘motto’ of the Indian nation, as any school-going child can tell us, is ‘Unity in Diversity’. It used to be the case that the rhetoric of unity was provided by the principle of secularism that served as a kind of overarching model transcending the particularities of religion, caste, ethno-religious community, gender and class. Disillusionment with the paucity of models for ‘Unity in Diversity’ has led people to look elsewhere, and one very obvious place is to view love marriages as emblematic of *secularism as practice* [sic]. However this has often meant that people have interpreted such marriages as representing a particular *politics* [sic] of secularism.

Congruent to the discourse of secularism, the approximately 450,000 Andaman residents are represented by state actors as a “model society” that had successfully put into practice India’s secular ideal of “unity in diversity”; a showcase example, where – in contrast to many regions on the subcontinent that are prone to outbreaks of communal violence – members of various linguistic, ethnic, religious, and caste groups intermarry and live together peacefully. This hegemonic discourse was frequently perpetuated by local interlocutors who conceptualized love marriage as a practice signifying both social change and secularism.

As a result, one repeatedly encounters the discourse of secularism in characteristic modes of self-expressions such as: “Within India, Andaman is a very special society. It is very secular.” I came across this sentence in February 2009 during a conversation with Shahida, a PhD student of English Literature, whom I had met along with her husband Varun, a lecturer at a local college, in the intimate atmosphere of their drawing room, located in a gentrifying suburb of the islands’ capital, Port Blair. The more formal conversation about professional careers at the dining table took a decisive turn when we jointly sat down on the couch of my hosts’ spacious apartment where they lived with their two Rottweilers. Here, I observed the unfolding of specific gender relations, which may be regarded as

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<sup>60</sup> Secularism forms one of the basic pillars of the Indian constitution, but has come increasingly under attack since the religious right, which propagates orthodox and communal ideas about India as an exclusive homeland of “Hindus”, continues to win elections and gains wide-spread support among the masses. Contrary to the many regions of the subcontinent, in broad generalization, the Andaman society has so far not been prone to religious bigotry, chauvinism, and communal violence due to its historical genealogy that manifested in an overall secular, creolized, and cosmopolitan setup (Zehmisch 2017).



characteristic of social changes within the Indian middle class. In the “tradition” of a “good Indian wife”, Shahida had cooked and served the meal, but she had not dined with me and her husband. In the islands, as in many parts of the Indian subcontinent, commensality implies a certain equality of status and social proximity (Heidemann 2013:54), but does not necessarily overcome practices of gender separation. However, partly breaking with such imposed norms, Shahida had assumed her status as modern, educated woman by listening and contributing to the conversation through the corridor while working in the kitchen. Coming to sit with us on the couch after the meal, she now started occupying equal share in the conversation. In my perception, her act of overcoming a traditional gender barrier in everyday life was in tune with the atmosphere of the drawing room itself; the room with its contemporary interior design, imported furniture, and high-end technical devices resembled similar bourgeois spaces across the globe and signified the academic couple’s embracing of aesthetic notions of modernity linked to consumerism and the conscious display of economic status; their adherence to transnational norms of class distinction also led my interlocutors to compare their life-style with that of “Westerners” like myself. In the conversation, both expressed their secular approach by assuring their dislike of the illegal – but, nonetheless, common – practice of paying dowry as well as religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Further, our discussion on contested notions of modernity and secularism linked up to my interlocutors’ narrative of their love marriage:

Before getting married, Shahida had been a student of Varun at the same college where they had fallen in love with each other. Their pre-marital relationship manifested in a marriage after Shahida had graduated. The couple emphasized that they had married against the will of their parents who would have preferred to arrange the marriage of their children by following rules of caste and religious endogamy. The fact that Varun was a son of Malayalam-speaking Hindus from Kerala in South India while Shahida’s parents were Urdu-speaking Muslims from Delhi in North India, complicated the suitability of the match. Their marriage “by choice” transcended the boundaries of religion (Hindu, Muslim), caste and language (Malayalam, Urdu) and challenged the separation of “races”. However, after some time, their parents come to accept that they had married out of love; among others, because there were so many love marriages in contemporary Andaman – which both viewed as an outcome of the islanders’ secularism.

This exemplary narrative from the field demonstrates the obvious desire of local interlocutors to represent their marriage practices as “modern” in order to be acknowledged correspondingly. My role in these conversations was often that of a reified and essentialized counterpart who – like a negative foil – mirrored the immanent presence of “the West” in their own interpretations of “modernity”. Through the means of love marriage, they constructed a proximity of values to the liberal, individualistic, postmodern “Occident”, against which my interlocutors assessed and negotiated their own positionalities as modern subjects who – both

explicitly and implicitly – came to terms with participating in the transnational global sphere.

## Conclusion

This chapter links the phenomenon of love marriage to the interplay of the global and the local, constructions of modernity and notions of secularism by considering the specific historical context of the Andamans. Notions of romantic love coming along with globalization fell upon fertile grounds in the island society: colonial and postcolonial migration and social-engineering processes have – out of force and by choice – led to various kinds of marital unions crossing religious, linguistic, ethnic, caste, and class boundaries; these cultural creolizations, in turn, influenced the larger tolerance of individuals and kin networks towards love marriages that challenged the reconstructed boundaries of diasporic communities in the Andamans. Further, processes of cultural creolization contributed to conceptualizations of the island society as secular and modern that shaped modes of self-definition among the islanders themselves. Consequently, the islanders came to increasingly view the practice of love marriage as emblematic of their own modernity and secularity in the age of globalization.

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