In India, ‘love and arranged’ marriages appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but Michiel Baas argues that this ‘opposition’ is being challenged by IT professionals in the South India city of Bangalore.

‘Arranged love’

Marriage in a transnational work environment

As the IT offices are open 24 hours a day and the working hours are flexible, most young IT professionals spend many hours in the confines of their workplace. Their lives revolve around their work, and this is how they usually live as singles in the city. But then the time comes to get married. On the whole Indian marriages are arranged, meaning that the parents and other family members will find their daughter or son a spouse. Almost without exception this means that the person will marry will be somebody of their own caste.

It is important to realise that, traditionally, an arranged marriage is not about whether the couple are actually in love, ‘in fact, in the case of Hindus, it is geared around the need to ensure acceptable marriage, and the boy are strangers to each other and that is their obligation to their parents that makes them sometimes reluctant, though consenting parties to the marriage.’ 4

A Transnational Work Environment

IT professionals come to Bangalore from all over India. They are mostly male graduates who were recruited by an IT company while still at university, or they come to stay with friends already in the industry in the hope of using contacts to find an IT job themselves. They usually arrive in Bangalore as bachelor's or bachelorettes which makes them an attractive proposition for IT companies since they are able to make long hours without having the responsibility of family at home. Working days averaging ten to twelve hours are not uncommon in the IT industry, and quite often weekends are worked too. Because of this the office becomes an important place for social interaction.

Bangalore, with its large number of pubs and restaurants, offers the perfect environment for the young, highly educated, well-paid professional. A ‘freshie’ within an IT company knows that they should make the most of these attractions, as within a few years he will almost certainly receive marriage proposals from his community and he will no longer be free to have the lifestyle he once did.

What lies behind the increasing number of IT professionals choosing to marry for love? Bhayya, for instance, is a software program-mer in his mid-twenties and belongs to a Kshatriya (warrior) caste. He has a girlfriend who is from a Brahmin (priestly) caste. Bhayya wants to postpone ideas of marriage for as long as possible. ‘My par-ents are very particular about community.’ According to Bhayya, ideas about marriage are changing ‘dramatically’ as more and more people marry outside their commu-nities. He himself has little interest in the caste system or anything associated with it. He knows he will marry his girlfriend one day. That said, he remains fearful of his parents’ reaction. When I asked him why he wanted to marry this girl he explained that he likes the fact that she is also working in the IT industry and that they have similar jobs.

By describing such unions as love marri-a-ges, it gives the impression that these arrangements are primarily of a romantic nature. However, they are often also about these young men being able to maintain their bachelor lifestyles. Although one might think that this is mostly about being able to continue visiting Bangalore’s many pubs, it is in fact much more about the lib-erty of being able to make as many hours as work as necessary. It is the type of flexibility a job within the Indian IT industry demands and a love marriage with another IT profes-sional is much more able to facilitate this.

Asked how Bhayya thinks he will be able to convince his parents, he explained that he will try to make clear how compatible their lifestyles are. Moreover, he added that his girlfriend also makes quite a bit of money, which is something which his community will profit from as well. And for that reason, ‘a new caste is born, one with its own set of rules and rituals. In this caste, the caste of the past no longer matters as the industry itself communicates both to the employees and the outside world that it has no place there. What matters is that they are IT profes-sionals and belong to the IT community.’

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Notes


In 2003 I conducted intensive anthropologi-cal fieldwork among Indian IT professionals in Bangalore for the duration of five months. I gathered data on a little over fifty IT professionals, some of whom I interviewed only once, whereas others I met up with more reg-u-larly. After this fieldwork I remained in close contact with some of my informants, following them by e-mail, and meeting up with them later during visits to Bangalore.