



Stephanie Stocker

Caste and Equality

Friendship Patterns among Young
Academics in Urban India

[transcript]

Culture and Social Practice

From:

Stephanie Stocker

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Friendship Patterns among Young Academics in Urban India

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Caste hierarchy has frequently been singled out as the overriding principle of Indian society. This book examines its significance among the highly-educated middle class in the Tamil town of Madurai. As part of their distinctive status as 'educated persons', young graduates form egalitarian constellations by ostensibly subverting the boundaries inscribed by caste hierarchy. Stephanie Stocker explores how these friendships are maintained in wider social contexts, finding that the actors engage in supportive networks throughout career and marriage events. Instead of assuming these relationships to be of an entirely different, 'alternative category', however, Stocker's study proposes a dynamic character of friendship which in fact remains in conjunction with Indian values of hierarchy.

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Introduction

Kātalai tāṇṭiyum uḷḷa paṭi – eṇṇum naṭputāṇ
uyarntatu pattu paṭi
("Friendship is one step beyond love – and it is
worth ten times more than love")

This slogan is an excerpt from the soundtrack of the movie *Nanban* ("friends"), a Tamil blockbuster, released in 2012. The film depicts the friendship between three male students, made in the campus of an engineering college in Chennai. Their relationship transcends the campus borders when two of them begin to search for their lost companion by recounting shared experiences, including common future aspirations, conflicts with parental authorities and professors or their first romantic encounters. *Nanban* was voted the "most expected film" through an online survey by the weekly magazine *Ananda Vikatan* in 2011. This great echo outside the country which, according to the magazine *India Today*, attracted international audiences in the United States, Malaysia and Singapore, brings me to the core of the thesis: egalitarian friendships among peer groups as a product of the educational regime in India.

While anti-hierarchical relations have existed throughout several periods in India, the ideal of a 'pure' and 'unrestricted' bond beyond established barriers constitutes a comparatively recent phenomenon. Evidently, such configurations have been a product of modernization, urbanization and the reservation politics of the Indian government which enhanced a new understanding of local hierarchies. Especially within the urban context, social boundaries as organizing principles continue to dissolve, become reformulated and reemerge in an altered mode (Bate 2009; Gorringer 2005; Kolenda 1978; Sekine 2001). These changes in established social relations will be analyzed through the example of students, graduates and alumni of Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU) in the southeast Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Illuminating those transformational processes from the perspective of India's young generation, the thesis investigates the following

central question: do peer groups of university graduates present an external, anti-hierarchical configuration, structured and defined by the principles of modern public education or do they appear to be organized by the ordering system of Tamil caste society?¹

Madurai provides a rewarding ethnographic setting for this inquiry, since its social structure is strongly influenced by local boundaries between and within adjacent, scattered villages. Apart from fragmented and localized caste and kinship segregations as well as rigid gender norms, a peculiar adherence to social standing and family reputation (*māṇam*) characterizes the population immediately surrounding the groups investigated. In Indian village society, the experience of friendship largely takes place within one's own caste or kin (Mandelbaum 1970: 355). My neighbor Navaneethan, a 63 year-old former MKU student, described to me the friendship patterns during his own college days, in the mid-1970s: "In previous generations, we lived in our native villages and towns. At that time, we acted according to the customs of our caste. For us, there was no chance of having friendship with other community members. Friends and cousins were the same." If students forged alliances in the academic context beyond caste or kin, they usually took the form of political relationships, in which 'friends' acted as party comrades.² It is exactly that regulated structure which motivated me to conduct my research in the Madurai region, a social scenario where only in the course of a growing migration and city agglomeration, youngsters formed friendships 'for their own sake'. Such configurations do not merely reveal a functional character but emotional content. *Kūṭṭu naṭṭu* ("togetherness"/ "friendship"), a term used to define relationships among peers, is a concept coined to celebrate common activities and distinctive forms of communication and has emerged in recent literature, lyrics and blockbusters.

In social anthropology, the significance and impact of friendships have been comparatively neglected, considering the range of kinship studies in this discipline. This gap in research proves particularly astonishing since across time periods and cultures friendship constitutes a fundamental form of socialization – from amicable liaisons in ancient Greece to spiritually motivated unions in the Middle Ages and virtual connections in global internet platforms today. Relevant philosophical and historical thought circle around the following questions: What makes friendship a special form of relationship in contrast to other constellations? In which way is friendship shaped by historical epochs and cultural influences? Do gender-specific connotations exist, and how do children and youngsters acquire the capacity to form friendships?

1 For an outline of the caste system in India and Tamil Nadu see section 2.3.2.

2 I am grateful to Navaneethan and Professor Thamburan Dharmaraj for these insights.

One of the earliest friendship ideals dates back to Greco-Roman antiquity, when Aristotle articulated his idea of friendship as a necessary prerequisite for good life in the 3rd century BCE. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he distinguishes three types of friendships: friendships of “utility”, based on advantages, friendships of “pleasure” marked by sociability and finally “pure” or “complete” friendships, based on goodness (1972: 230ff.). While the philosopher expresses a skeptical view of the first two forms, for they are merely attributed to external purposes, the last type of friendship enjoys the highest regard and manifests itself as a perfect symmetrical bond (Eichler 1999: 33ff.). A similarly high appreciation for friendship was expressed by Epicurus for whom “a life without friends is a life diseased, pained, and in need of succor” (Mitchell 2001: 1). Three centuries later, the roman politician and philosopher Cicero wrote in his letters to Atticus “who banished the friendship from life, away from the world the sun” – a statement which portrays friendship as a voluntary and reciprocal union, an end in itself (Eichler 1999: 56-57).

A spiritual component is introduced in the medieval period when Thomas Aquinas conceptualized friendship as a religious union. Focusing principally on a bond between men and God, the theologian regarded friendships as a feature of Christian Western civilization (Devere 2005: 844ff.).³ Michel de Montaigne superseded that restricted conceptualization by postulating a model of friendship involving an affectionate and self-chosen alliance. In his essay “Of friendship” (1909-14), he recounts his ideal bond of mutual knowledge and understanding. In contrast to heterosexual relations, where both men and women merely take advantage of the arrangement, he postulated that a friendship between men is grounded on reliability, openness, solidarity and stability.

During the utilitarianist era of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, skeptical views of friendship emerged. According to Francis Bacon, egoism and utility dominate the relationship between males while a ‘pure’ and ‘true’ friendship rarely proves possible. David Hume summarizes that attitude by pointing out that friendship mainly results out of pretence and fraud (Eichler 1999: 110ff.). The most cynical perspective on the alleged amity, however, was formulated by Arthur Schopenhauer through his well-known slogan: “A friend in need, as the saying goes, is rare. Nay, it is just the contrary; no sooner have you made a friend than he is in need, and asks for a loan” (2015).

The critical rationalism of the Enlightenment era in the late 18th century serves as the traditional counter pole to the utilitarian tradition. Its main representative, Immanuel Kant, defines friendship as a union created and maintained out of mutual and equal affection. Importantly, this affection is not

3 For friendship ideals in other religious systems see Devere 2005.

‘irrational’ but based on reason and free choice (Eichler 1999: 127ff.). As a new and essential aspect of friendship, the German philosopher introduces the term of ‘sincere and pure sentiment’ (“aufrichtige, reine Gesinnung”) (ibid: 133), a concept which encompasses consideration, appreciation and respect. In that sense, friendship not only requires mutual attraction but also implies *distance*. By respecting the other person, one has to measure his own demands and not harass his friend with personal debauchment, indulgences and weakness. Though helpfulness constitutes a central element for the Kantian model of friendship, he attributed an auxiliary rather than exhaustive character to that kind of support. Friendship therefore, is based on mutual attraction and decent detachment alike.

Against the background of loosening family ties throughout the last century, academic interest in relationships among non-kin has grown considerably. Global demographic trends like migration, urbanization and digitalization worldwide increased the significance of friendships as an analytical social category, complementary to established familial bonds (Tenbruck 1964: 450). In addition to altered family structures, current fields of interest have investigated the impacts of gendered practices. This aspect has remained neglected over a long period of time, as the above-mentioned philosophical debates about friendship almost exclusively concentrated on relationships between men.⁴ Following contemporary social and psychological studies, however, women prove to be more open and approachable for amicable bonds while men appear the ‘retiring’ and ‘diffident’ sex. Moreover, *cross-gendered* constellations have emerged and increasingly gained recognition. So far, alliances between men and women have largely been considered an intermediate state to a sexual liaison. Related studies, however, revealed that to a certain extent, male respondents attribute a higher quality to friendships with women where they experience openness and less rivalry than to those among their own sex.⁵

Regardless of the variety in research interests, contemporary approaches of social theory analyze friendship as a “social phenomenon of modernity” (Brandt 2013: 25) since that constellation composes an outcome of internal processes of differentiation in ‘modern’ Western society. Following respective approaches, friendships appear as an advanced model and expression to overcome social segregation – despite critical voices that it is precisely such a differentiation which impedes cohesion (ibid). Focusing on cross-cultural relationships between Māori and Pākehā in Aotearoa New Zealand, Agnes Brandt therefore evaluates

4 Few exceptions can be found in Brandt (2013: 24).

5 Broadcasted in the radio program “Eine Seele in zwei Körpern” by Dr. Michael Conradt on 17/12/2014 (<http://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/wissen/radiowissen/freundschaft-seele-koerper100.html>).

the variety of contemporary alliances as “flexible forms of sociality that allow the actors to actively construct, de- or reconstruct existing boundaries” (ibid: 16).

The idea of friendship as a ‘modern’ phenomenon becomes relevant in the Indian context, where actors from different social backgrounds increasingly form friendships that emerge in a non-familial milieu, external to their original social group. Those constellations appear as a recent category and a result of wider social transformations in contemporary India. Central issues of my research include conditions and limits of egalitarian friendship constellations with respect to prevalent notions of social boundaries on the one hand and current developments that blur established barriers on the other. Based on the following observations, I ask: on which grounds do friendships exist and how are they constructed in different socio-cultural situations? Analyzing the experience of friendship from an inter-cultural point of view turned out to be a fairly complicated endeavor: in social anthropology, friendships have found only marginal interest while kinship systems prevail as the main structuring principle in ethnographic settings. The reason for this lack of research lies in the difficulty to define ‘friendship’, a concept which, in contrast to kin designations, is dynamic and context-related. Not only does this term signify something different among and within several cultures, it is consistently reformulated across actors, eras and situations. Moreover, the notion and ideal of friendship is not limited to one constellation but may be attached to other forms of relationships. It appears among kin, within political contexts or as part of a romantic liaison. Following Brandt, we deal with a concept, which comprises a “relational phenomenon, i.e., the meaning of friendship is acquired in the process of engagement between actors” (2013: 36). Though the reluctance for studying friendships seems to be evident, its topicality cannot be denied. The challenge for the anthropological discipline therefore lies in approaching the term by emic categories, explanation patterns and practices.

Aware of the conceptual complexity, I refrain from grasping an ‘indigenous’ notion of friend in absolute terms but limit my scope to *peer groups* in a higher educational stage as an accessible focus. Murugesu, a 29 year-old PhD student described the peculiar amity among such campus relationships at Madurai Kamaraj University: “After the completion of UG, we have PG. Here, the atmosphere will be different and the friendship circle will be different.” Peer group as a sociological phenomenon was first introduced by the American sociologist Charles Cooley (1929). Originally, it designates a group of persons of similar age, origin or sex. According to ethnographic studies, peer groups constitute a distinctive referential system to a prevailing dominant social structure. In an autobiographic outline on masculine values, David Jackson

describes how peers perform that distinction by behavioral norms and an egalitarian structure. Common examples include mutual sharing or teasing: “The tightly organized network of male bonding [...] effectively polices the boundaries of what counts as masculinity through ‘norm-enforcing mechanisms’ (like joking, bantering and swearing)” (Jackson 1990: 170f.). Considering its growing social relevance in many parts of the world, most related studies explore how those constellations get incorporated in different socio-cultural contexts: How do peers situate friendships in a domestic or ritual environment? Do local hierarchies become reproduced or do friendships serve to circumvent local boundaries? Such an analysis requires an examination of the foundation for maintaining intimate ties. How do actors cultivate their connections and which meaning do they attribute to their friendships? Which topics appear and which taboos persist in those cohesive circles?

While most studies in Tamil Nadu have conceptualized peer groups in terms of a transitional stage of adolescence (Nakassis 2013), my research predominantly refers to groups of young adults, notably MKU-graduate students from their mid-1920s until early 1930s. Exploring common stages to acquire adulthood and maturity, I intend to illustrate that friendships and alliances, made in the educational context, constitute *more* than a temporary constellation which is restricted to the campus. Instead, I will show that those groups do have an integrative function in wider social and ritual events. Hence, the point of interest lies in the status and significance of peer groups, an anti-hierarchical constellation shaping the realm of experience for degree holders.

In Indian society, other studies exist on egalitarian clusters, mainly in the urban space using the example of business partners, syndicates or political associations. With reference to caste, kinship and gender categories, principle interest circulated around the question of whether a ‘modern’ environment, notably a site where such segregations are subverted, produces an altered understanding of the ritual order. Christopher J. Fuller’s anthology *Caste today* provides one representative account: André Beteille accesses what he describes as “modern occupations” (1996: 150), namely, an assigned middle or upper class composed of academics, lawyers or journalists. On the basis of their everyday practices, explanation patterns and interactions, the author explores the extent to which those groups adhere to the Indian caste order and which sanctions continue to persist. Beteille finds an ambivalent and unstable view, in the sense that his informants alter their attitude towards caste differences according to the situation. While intellectuals emphasize a shrinking role of social barriers as part of a nationalist discourse that proclaims progressive ideals, in other situations,

caste rules appear in a ‘curtailed’ form, which the author describes as “a truncated system” (1996: 161).

Ethnographic and sociological studies on sectors of society such as the ‘middle class’, ‘academics’ or the ‘urban population’ are generally confronted with the problematic task of defining a clear-cut social category. Aware of that methodological difficulty, my research accesses peer groups as an analytical focus, which I understand as a class-phenomenon, related to a distinctive ‘modern’ category. The supposition that cross-caste and cross-gendered friendships require an environment to come into view, a space in which ‘modern’ ideals such as the value of equality remain prevalent, forms the foundation for this approach. In other words, the types of friendships in my study formed according to the local understanding of ‘modernity’. Moreover, these constellations principally occur among social groups of the population that one could categorize as the ‘middle class’. Such a classification is certainly projected, yet by no means arbitrary. In fact, studies on class mobility in urban areas of South India have defined friendships across different backgrounds as ‘indicators of modernity’ (Dickey 2010: 198).

The following chapters are divided into three parts: an outline on the purpose and structure of the study, containing relevant theoretical approaches (part I), examinations of friendships created and maintained within and outside the campus (part II) and niches for cultivating those constellations in the ritual marriage context (part III). Using the example of several peer groups at different stages in life, I employ a diachronic perspective on how egalitarian friendships, as an embodied form of a proclaimed value of equality, are stabilized or altered throughout different social environments.

Certainly, utilized terms such as ‘modernity’ or ‘middle class’ appear imprecise and need to be reconsidered and placed in the research context. Part one begins by specifying the theoretical approaches to examining ‘modernity’ in the anthropological discipline. Aside from terminological clarifications, chapter one highlights that not one but many different forms of modernity exist. Indeed, a range of global developments – industrialisation, democratization or digitalization – take place in several parts of the world, but contain a similar intention and agenda. At the same time, the impacts of those trends may considerably differ from one another at the local level. Such variations can only become understood by taking into account the role of cultural practices that model the immediate configuration of ‘modern’ influences. ‘Modernity’ therefore does not necessarily signify a ‘loss of culture’, but offers an opportunity for new formations that emerge from the interplay between large-scale impacts and local principles. Global flows of ideas, products and people as

well as inter-cultural linkages of events occur within the framework of normative imaginations and systems.

Assuming a heterglossic and culture-specific form of modernity, I turn to its elaboration in an Indian context. Based on historical outlines, contemporary trends and related academic approaches, I move forward defining a distinctive realm of experience as a *modern compartment*. That sphere appears in the form of educational institutions, companies or technologies which predominantly emerged in the postcolonial era proclaiming ideals of equality, individual choice or women's empowerment. Characterized by standardized principles that span the entire state, modern compartments compose a countervailing power vis a vis local mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The topicality of modern processes calls for a reexamination of existing boundaries in South Tamil Nadu where, according to the Indian scholar Rajan Krishnan, recent developments are shaping the "tamil psyche, which is torn between the threatening pre-modern assertion of caste and 'egalitarian' and free modern market space of the modern individual" (2008: 141). This tension most affects the Indian middle class, which represents the social category with which nearly all of my informants identify themselves despite heterogeneity within the group with respect to other characteristics. 'Middle class' presents another problematic term that finds itself consistently rearticulated among and within different cultures. Therefore, in a subsequent section, I elucidate how class identity becomes constructed and acted out in the Madurai region. In doing so, I do not concentrate exclusively on aspirations, lifestyle and modes of distinction; with reference to the interplay between global trends and prevailing social norms, I point out the peculiar position "in between" conflicting demands.

Having clarified central concepts of 'modernity', 'Indian modernity' and 'middle class', the second chapter gives those reflections a more concrete form with the example of peer groups of Indian students and graduates. The research question about the significance of such friendship constellations will be placed within the wider ethnographic debate about whether those groups display a 'modern' and countervailing structure that is maintained within encompassing social principles in Tamil Nadu. A range of classic approaches adheres to Louis Dumont's theory that a foundational element of Indian society consists in a hierarchical precept, based on a pure-impure divide. Beyond caste segregations, that principle determines other domains including marriage circles and daily interactions in public (Skoda 2002: 143). Though that debate was initiated more than half a century ago, it continues even today and has gained relevance against the background of recent social developments: while the population, particularly in the surrounding villages, mainly identifies with the local community, the

urban context exhibits several recently formed networks that transcend caste principles and related restrictions. Typically, the educational realm delineates the above-defined ‘modern compartment’ so that related accounts of social transformations assess “how a particular kind of modern subject gets created [...] by the technologies of the school” (Kumar 2007: 221). Precisely, the educational sphere functions as a transmitter of models and ideas of the modern nation state, including democracy, equality, justice and development (Alex 2009: 141, Jeffery 2005: 13). I argue that peer groups produce an embodiment of that ‘modern’ state discourse by retaining the value of equality. Hence, they turn into egalitarian constellations that subvert established boundaries of the South Tamil caste society – a phenomenon defined as “college culture” (Osella & Osella 1998: 191). The concept of *conviviality* (“Konvivium”), introduced by Christian Strümpell, provides one recent approach to explaining such constellations. It posits egalitarian friendships and gatherings as temporary phenomena, which find acceptance in specific spheres, particularly in modern compartments. However, in domains where the ritual order prevails, convivial configurations remain unseparated from a hierarchical caste order. Having outlined that argumentation in great detail, the analytical challenge of this paper lies in reviewing whether that approach can be applied to the case study at hand.

The research is based on one year of fieldwork from October 2011 until September 2012. Rather than researching conventional middle class milieus, often associated with populated metropolises, I carried out my study in a geographical setting in which a segregated social structure determines interactions within the population more so than in other Tamil regions. I approached peculiar concepts of ‘friendship’, ‘modernity’ or ‘educated behavior’ not only through my contacts to the graduate students, but also living with a host family in the outskirts of Madurai. In this setting, I had the opportunity to experience first-hand how the exposure to a different system translates into behavioral responses directly, negotiated or in a newly articulated fashion in the domestic and ritual context. Those insights proved indispensable for my research, the methodology for which I present in detail in the second part of this chapter.

Part II turns to the ethnographic material, pursuing the question about how friendships are made and maintained in the educational sphere and beyond. Chapter 3 assesses the campus of Madurai Kamaraj University as a crucial setting for egalitarian peer groups: aspirations of students reveal that education promises more than mere prospects for a successful career. Due to their educated background, students and graduates acquire a distinctive status of *paṭiccavaṅka* (“educated person”). On this ground, they turn into networks, based on a

distinctive social position. Observing everyday interactions and activities of a selected sample of Master students (MA) and doctoral candidates (PhD) between 20 and 29 years of age, I investigate whether those constellations effectively constitute an 'external' model that counteracts South Tamil caste society. In fact, a closer look reveals internal strategies of both inclusion and exclusion. In addition to gender provisions, campus friendships exist within a framework of ranking one another and reveal superior and inferior positions within the group. Differing relationships, attitudes or courtesy point to multiple forms of friendships, the quality of which is determined by kinship designations. Finally, I will turn to the significance of caste differences. While students negate caste-based discrimination amongst themselves, they do refer to community identity for rationalizing characteristics, behavior and achievements of their friends.

Chapter 4 analyzes how friendship constellations are entrenched within Tamil society and everyday life: observing the behavior of peer groups in several adjacent home villages, I point out that students not only acquire an elaborated status as *paṭiccavaṅka* but succeed in maintaining egalitarian clusters. Such networks commonly function as a support system along their path toward living secular lives. As college friends, they constitute a category separated from local village friends, often acquaintances from the same community or kin. Yet, college friends do not confront established norms in Tamil village society: as a vivid feature of peer groups, I highlight its potential for reinterpreting networks and the extent to which these individuals adjust their interaction in line with social restrictions in a domestic context.

The dynamic character of friendship patterns finds full consideration in the *ritual* framework. Part III turns to the designated stage of life subsequent to graduation, namely that of marriage, which presents the central life event for every Tamil person and demarks entrance into maturity by asserting the ritual status. During the remaining chapters, the principal focus lies on educational influences through an analysis of the graduates' view on marriage and its significance for egalitarian friendships. To date, the ritual context has been commonly assumed a *limit* to anti-hierarchical formations. Yet, when I gave a presentation on networks and friendships between academics from different social backgrounds on the 43rd Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin, the audience raised the objection that anti-hierarchical constellations may coexist within the ritual sphere. Indeed a valid comment, considering the involvement of non-familial friends in marriage practices. In particular in the view of the young brides and grooms, support from friends is perceived as an essential part of this life stage. Indirect and overt engagement of non-kin friends

will be highlighted by the example of several case studies, including networks of former MKU students in an advanced age.

Ethnographies principally regard marriage as a “key site of cultural contestation” between the young generation on the one hand and parental authorities on the other. Chapter 5 therefore presents an outline of theoretical accounts on marriage as a converging zone for negotiating inter-generational worldviews. Kimberly Hart assumes the conventional view of most ethnographic works when she defines marriage as a “site where the politics of gender, ideologies of modernity, and economy intersect with young people’s desire for emotional fulfillment” (2007: 347). Against this academic backdrop, I present recent changes in Tamil middle class weddings, particularly the transition from consanguineous to non-kin marriages. Reviewing the wide range of academic accounts of marriage in India, I place the focus on its significance for the young middle class generation in South India. Observations of matchmaking strategies make apparent why family members of bride and groom invest a large portion of their capital into a suitable alliance. While related ethnographies argued that, within the ritual context, egalitarian friendships fade, my findings suggest increasing influence and a cocreation of non-familial contacts. Their experience and shared views throughout principal stages of matchmaking and ceremonial happenings consolidates the bond of anti-hierarchical friendships. Spouses, siblings and friends act as ‘agents’ to introduce ‘modern’ principles into an arranged marriage – including the value of equality, participation of the younger generations, codes of conduct, but also an elaborated taste for and the integration of romantic feelings and desires. The crucial role of non-kin friends has increasingly been adopted in a sometimes embellished way in Tamil media. *Kadhalil sodhappuvadhu yeppadi* (“How to destroy love”), a 2012 romantic comedy film, which highlights the participative role of friends in approving or destroying courtships and alliances, exemplifies this phenomenon. In contrast to aforementioned ethnographies, however, I argue that this form of involvement does not oppose but takes place *in accordance* with established social norms.

Chapter 6 turns to students’ and graduates’ narratives about compatibility between spouses, considering familial, economic, physical and astrological aspects. In the case of non-kin alliances between unacquainted families, professional assemblers guide the matchmaking process, monitor the search for a spouse and introduce additional standards and criteria for compatibility. Based on graduates’ ideal of a *companionate* marriage (Fuller & Narasimhan 2008: 752), I point out how pertinent profile data are rationalized by applying acquired ‘modern’ ideals of equality, individual choice or a strengthened position of the woman. During this section, I follow the recommendation of Henrike Donner “to

challenge simplistic assumptions about the way new ‘modern’ selves are constructed in relation to social institutions like marriage and to analyze generalizing concepts like intimacy and companionate marriage through an anthropological reading of specific ideas and social relations” (2008: 89). This chapter rejects the assumption that marriage negotiations are consistently determined by parental authorities and rather highlights the space for my conversation partners to articulate their own desires in line with culture-specific boundaries.

Notwithstanding divergent formulations of conjugal ideals, cross-generational consent about the crucial importance of marriage remains. Peers therefore not only urge each other to start a family, but establish personal contacts between the spouses and work to make the bride and groom attractive to each other. That engagement beyond the family-initiated search for a spouse is demonstrated in chapter 7, which provides a meticulous description of principal matchmaking rituals – from first encounters between in-law families until the finalization of the match. Recent progressive trends have led to growing uncertainties among wife givers and takers alike, an increasing demand for remedy rituals and creative strategies of inquiry. I highlight inter-generational views on the right procedure, an area where non-familial networks increasingly become activated. The case examples suggest that peers or other actors external to the family take on a crucial role as mediators (*terintavaṅka*) in matchmaking.

The status and function of non-ritual friends will be further disclosed during the section on wedding rituals (*kalyāṇam*). Chapter 8 provides insights into recent trends in the conducting of the ceremonial event. Mushrooming halls and the large variety of decoration, style, music and other features transform the ritual into a platform for displaying and strengthening social standing. Based on several extracts from the marriage ceremony, I point out in which way university friends become incorporated into or excluded from the ritual activities. Observation of their interaction in beauty parlors, during procedures on stage and the wedding meal reveal different forms of support before, throughout and after the event. Moreover, I take account of ritual moments in which egalitarian constellations appear inauspicious. For elucidation, I turn to the visual representation in printing and audio media, such as invitation cards, wedding albums and videos. A digression on courtships and self-chosen unions defines non-familial friends and peers as main actors. Having presented the delicate implication of ‘love marriage’ (as opposed to a companion marriage) in Tamil society, I illuminate with the help of a case study the function of peers as key organizers – from initiating formalities to ensuring the proper exertion of ceremonial events.

The final conclusion brings together previous strands of argumentation: reviewing peer behavior throughout the chapters, this thesis demonstrates how Tamil students, graduates and postgraduates creatively navigate across differing systems. This section directs the reader's attention to the actor's ability to adjust his or her mode of interaction with the prevailing social environment. Based on these considerations, I discuss the flexible character of Tamil friendship ideals that exist side by side. To enrich the debate on caste, status and anti-hierarchy in Tamil Nadu, I pose the question of whether the concept of conviviality can be applied to social networks among academics. While I largely find this approach useful for my own case study, I also propose alternative thoughts and highlight previously neglected aspects.

My ethnography traces the experience of a representative section of the young, middle class generation at the beginning of their career and entry into family life. Against this background, the thesis allows inferences into emerging issues in social anthropology with respect to local notions of "modernity", "education" and "distinction" as well as implications of changing ritual practices. It inquires into how modern state discourses, promoted by higher education, may succeed or fail in influencing local practices. In a concrete sense, it asks to what extent new professional prospects and a changed social composition in the academic context produce a transformation of established boundaries. Such concerns build on a plethora of broadly conceived research investigating whether educational regimes reproduce or undermine embedded social, cultural and economic inequalities.

Finally, I highlight remaining inconsistencies. A first discrepancy concerns the conceptual approach of 'egalitarian' groups. Certainly, one cannot assume such constellations as a clear-cut category. Interactions, boundaries, activities and quality of peer groups vary across parameters, including gender, caste, class and age and those factors lead to differing viewpoints among individual peer group members with regard to their experience of friendship. In fact, despite expressing a high regard for and displaying actual behavior in favor of equality, the educational sphere generates caste-based inequalities, typically through the revitalization of political movements (see section 3.5). Yet, the participants in my study form clusters in a domain where secular ideals are specifically enhanced. Therefore, I argue that particularly those constellations, more than others in South Tamil society, are distinctly marked by ideals such as irrational love, intimacy, and emotions resisting social barriers.

Second, a definite confrontation of 'university friends' towards other forms of relationships appears to be artificial (see chapter 3.3): at times, the discursive construction of the notion of 'friend' is ambivalent and contradictory, which

makes it impossible to define this concept in unambiguous terms. It must be conceded that a friendship ideal exists among kin, neighbors or close family acquaintances. Aware that this form of friendship might occur in other social contexts as well, I adhere to the example of peers as an analytical cluster.

A third clarification refers to the lack of a common understanding of terms like 'modern', 'backward' or 'educated'. In search of a comprehensive interpretation, this thesis risks evoking the impression of an attempt to lump together deviating opinions and experiences into a consistent picture. Moreover, concepts vary across different layers, especially on semantic, institutional or personal levels. For a differentiated analysis, the data set includes institutionalized actions, narratives and deviating interpretations alike. Other neglected aspects and prospects for future studies are presented in the conclusion.